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44 Western
MAGAZINE
JUNE

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44 Western

MAGAZINE

JUNE

GREAT NOVEL OF
GUN-BLASTED
RANGES

**GUN-FIGHTER OF
STARVATION POOL**

by **LARRY A. HARRIS**

ART LAWSON

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BOOTHILL WAITS IN BUCKHORN

A NOVELETTE OF MIDNIGHT RAIDERS

by **ED EARL REPP**

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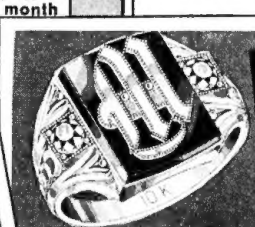
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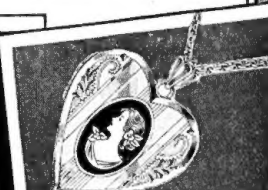
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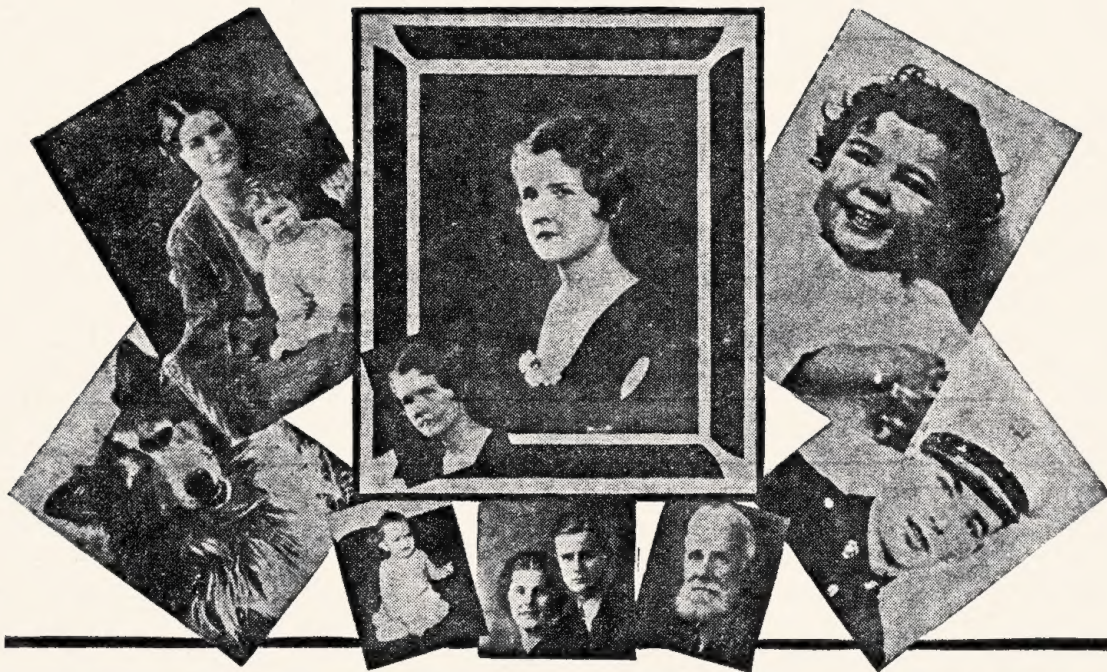
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.44 Western

MAGAZINE

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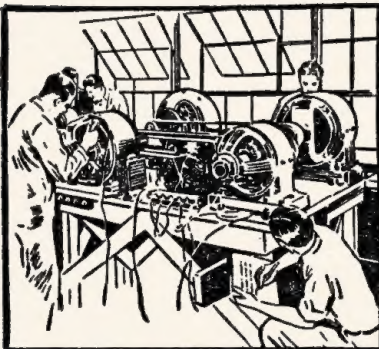
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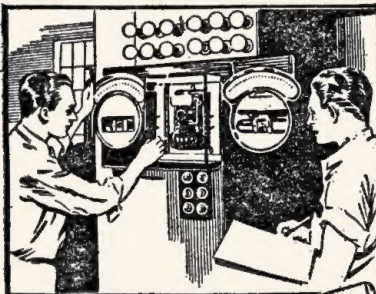
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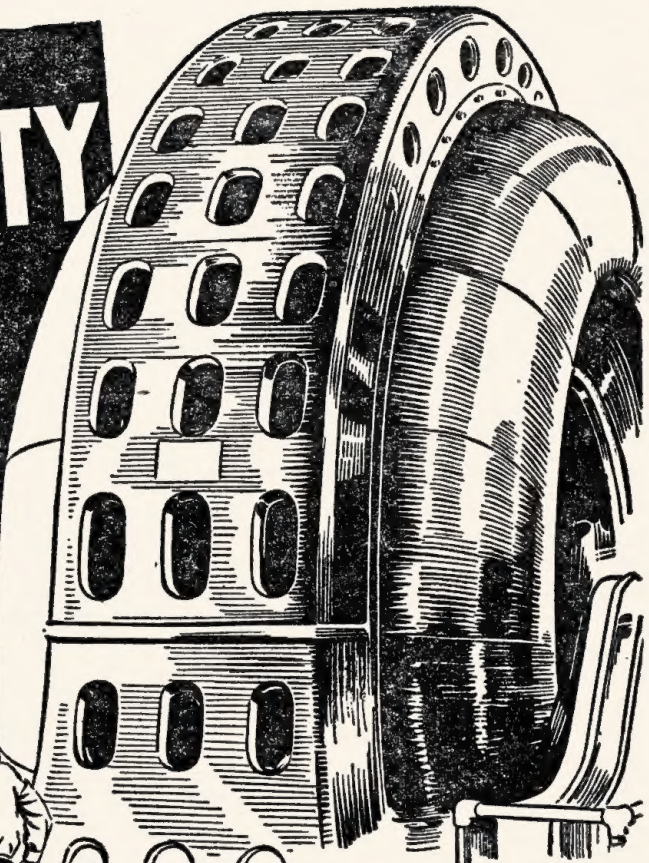
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FIVE years had passed since Bob Kimbroe had seen the home ranch—two years of bloodshed and war, three in prison. Yet, as he led his jaded grulla horse from the Bent K slaughtering pen toward the main house, there was no joy in his heart. In a bundle behind the saddle, was the faded gray uniform of the Confederacy he was supposed to have disgraced.

Lamplight was already seeping through the curtained windows of the Bent K ranchhouse. Near the front porch Bob dropped his horse's reins. Before him, in the gloom of the sheltered portico, a figure stirred. Bob recognized his father then, and stopped, as the oldster's voice lashed out at him.

"That'll be far enough, Bob. I saw you when you first dipped down into the valley. Whatever you've got to say can be said from where you're standing."

Colonel Ely Kimbroe came to the edge of the porch to glare down at his son. His finely chiseled face was working, his eyes flaming with stormy passions. He was leaning on a cane, his head thrust forward belligerently. He had aged in five years. His beard and hair were gray.

"Well?" he inquired harshly.

"I have nothin' to say, Dad," Bob said slowly.

"Then be on your way!" Colonel Kimbroe barked fiercely. "I want no part of you, Bob. You've fetched me all the disgrace I can stand. The Bent K is no longer home to you. Your war record speaks for itself. I can only thank God that your mother didn't live to know what a yellow cur you turned out to be."

There in the drizzling gloom, Bob stood rooted, trembling in every muscle. Beneath the brim of his soaked Stetson his face was stiff and pale.

"I figgered you'd listen to my story, Dad," he said hoarsely. "I—"

"Listen!" old Kimbroe snapped. "Why, you—"

"I'll cause you no more trouble, Dad. You can take your damned slaughter pen an' go to hell!"

He didn't hear his sire's scathing rebuke. Flinging astride his horse, Bob spurred out of the ranchyard. His anger cooled a little before he was out of sight of the ranch, but the bitterness remained. He had done the very thing he had promised himself he wouldn't do. For a week Bob had steeled himself for this meeting. All along he had known that his fiery-tempered father would fly off the handle.

With his own flesh and blood against him, it was going to be triply hard trying to clear his name. It scarcely seemed worth the trouble. They had branded him a back-stabbing traitor on the field of battle. If that's the way they wanted it, maybe he'd better play out the cards the way they were dealt. . . .

Against the roaring, smoky background of the Texas cow country during the passion-flaring reconstruction period after the Civil War, Bob Kimbroe, an outcast among his own people, will break a new trail to frontier gun-justice in the next issue of *.44 Western*. Larry A. Harris, author of "Gun-Fighter of Starvation Pool," will tell the story in novel length.



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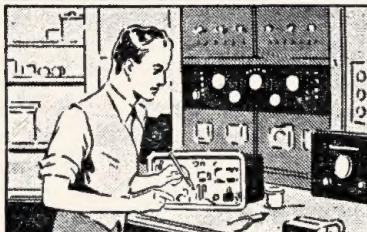
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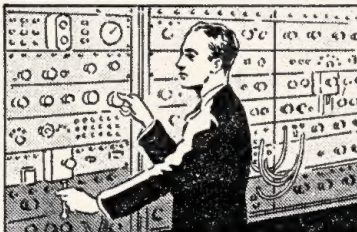
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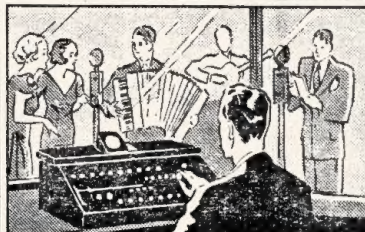
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A thrilling, fast-action novel of
a traitor rancher who fought
his way back to manhood.

Gun-Fighter of Starvation Pool

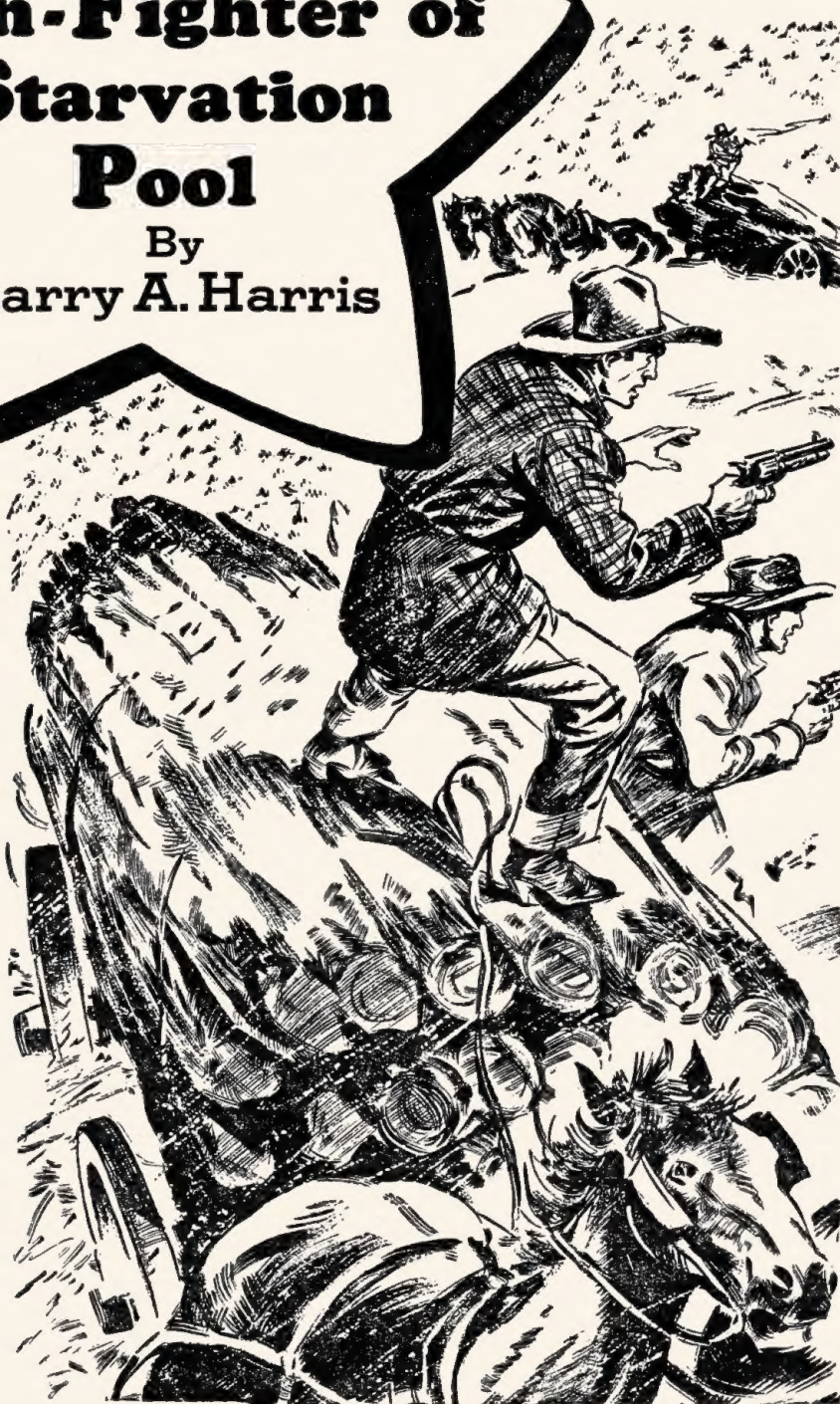
By
Larry A. Harris



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wall ranchers of Cub Basin Pool faced final, smash-
ing defeat—on a blizzard-swept night of triple mur-
der And the only man who could save them
★ was wild, young Tip Binford—the prodigal outcast
whose treachery had sealed the Basin's fate! ★



The riders whirled nearer through the blinding storm. Pistols flamed. White-hot pain stabbed at Tip's shoulder.

CHAPTER ONE

Murder Guns

LIGHT fell thick and black over the high Guadalupe. An icy wind whipped out of the north, fetching the first snow. In the high timber

hemming Cub Basin, the scattered aspens had lost their yellow leaves. Winter had come early. In another month the folks of the basin would be snowed in.

At the toe of the hills the scattered, clapboard buildings of the Hatchet ranch caught the full brunt of the raging storm.

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Years ago, when Sam Binford had built the spread, he had argued and be damned that the hills back of the house would give him ample wind break. Time had proved him wrong. On more than one occasion drifting snow had almost covered the sheds. But to tell old Sam Binford he had erred, was asking for an all-round, double-barreled cussing.

Inside the rambling house Sam finished his supper, shoved his wheel chair back from the table. Beneath shaggy brows his steely gray eyes glared rancorously at the two old cowboys, who were still eating.

"Anybody'd think you had all night to eat, Clem, you an' Slim," he crabbed. "Fill your gullets an' let's go. Don't want Prather or the other men to decide a thing till I get to the meetin'. Any timber that's sold out of these hills will be done over my dead body."

"It's blowin' purty bad, Sam," Clem offered mildly. "Don't you reckon—"

"Blowin'!" Sam Binford snorted belligerently. "Hell, don't I know it? What if it is? I been through worse storms than you'll ever see. Don't matter if I am crippled up like an old woman. I'm goin' to the meetin', if you'll rig the buckboard an' tote me out to it."

Grumbling, Sam propelled himself into the front room. In front of the roaring fireplace he stopped, tucked the blanket about his legs. He waited impatiently until Clem came in and helped him into his sheepskin. Clem was a grizzled oldster himself, but strong as a gnarled oak, and tolerant.

"Slim's gettin' the buckboard," he said.

"Don't know what I'd do without you two," Sam conceded grudgingly.

"Tip will come back to help you some day, Sam."

Sam's crippled figure stiffened. His thin lips drew tight across his pale, rugged face.

"I'm tryin' to forget Tip, Clem," he re-

buked sternly. "Tip's made his bed. Now let him lay in it! As sheriff, he's likely jangling' around town makin' eyes at all the dancehall gals. I chased him off the place once an' I'll do it ag'in. An' if ary man thinks I won't, let Tip try it. The Hatchet spread can go to hell when I'm gone. There comes Slim. Let's go."

Hoofbeats sounded out in the yard. Buckboard wheels creaked as they rattled over the frozen ground. Clem picked up Sam's withered, bundled figure in his arms. He carried him outside and placed him in the buckboard seat.

Sam wouldn't listen to the offers of the men to ride with him. "Hell, no! You boys foller on your hosses. Give me them lines."

With the reins in his gloved hands he drove out of the yard to the wagon road. The cold wind stung his face, brought tears to his puckered eyes. Snow struck his cheeks like ghostly fingers. Above the howling wind and the rattle of his own rig he heard the two loyal Hatchet cowboys jogging their horses along the road behind him.

SAM swore into the collar of his sheepskin as poignant memories deviled him. He was a hard, unimaginative man with a mind of his own. He had slaved like hell to make the Hatchet spread what it was, building all his hopes in his orphaned son, Tip.

When Tip grew up into a strapping youth his interest in the Hatchet seemed to wane. Sam learned that Tip was drinking and gambling in nearby San Marcial town. That made Sam fume and swear. But the break didn't come until Tip mentioned Linda McCabe.

"Linda McCabe," Sam had croaked incredulously. "My God, son, wake up to what you're talkin' about. I could stummick your gamblin' an' drinkin'. I paid for your hell-raisin' sprees with only a whimper. But Linda McCabe, that

yeller-haired daughter of King McCabe —

"She's a fine girl, Dad. You'd say so, too, if you knew her."

"I don't want to know her. I know her by name well enough! The daughter of a tinhorn gambler."

"I aim to marry her." Tip had grinned cockily.

Old Sam could smell the whiskey on Tip's breath. His face twitched with uncontrollable fury.

"Then git out, Tip!" he had choked hoarsely. "Git out an' don't ever set foot on the ranch again."

Sam had chased Tip off the ranch at the point of a gun. He had never been the same after that. The poison of his bitterness seemed to undermine his steel-thewed body. He grew morose, cross-grained. It was a shock he never got over, his break with Tip.

Six months ago when he had suffered a paralytic stroke the doctor from town had told him, "You'll have to take it easy, Sam. You were big and strong once, but you ain't no more. Quit worrying."

"What's Tip doin'?" Sam had gruffed.

Tip was still hanging around town, the doctor had said. "Tip's just headstrong and wild, Sam. He'll come out of the kinks and you'll be proud of him some day. Don't know whether you know it or not, but Tip's running against Will Peabody for the office of sheriff."

Sam had tried to hide his pride. Never a man to show affection, he would have died before he let anyone suspect that he was interested in the outcome of that election. But folks knew that remorse was eating old Sam's heart out. Stubbornly he refused to go to town or to see Tip. He tried to be casual the day of the election.

"How did that hell-raisin' son of mine make out?" he asked Clem.

"Why, I don't know, Sam."

"Then, by God, find out!" Old Sam

yelled back, and he pounded the table.

Clem rode to town and came back.

"Tip won," he said queerly.

Sam smothered the gladness in his heart. He scowled and snapped, "Damn shame! It'll just swell the hellion's head all the more. . . ."

Now with hate a rankling, festering sore within him, Sam Binford was going to tell King McCabe where to get off. Chill, miserable, he put the team to a gallop. He knew every inch of the winding, brush-hemmed wagon road across the basin. He covered the two miles to Scott Prather's Slash-P ranch in record time.

As he wheeled up in the ranchyard he saw the saddled horses and rigs near the porch. Through the curtained, lamp-lit windows he saw men moving about in the front room. A thin layer of snow was already covering the ground. Wind wailed around the eaves of the house.

CLEM carried Sam up on the porch. Scott Prather met them at the front door. He was a tall, gaunt-checked man. Hardships and toil were stamped upon him. He had struggled to make a living for his frail wife and large brood of children.

"Glad to see you, Sam," he said. "Come in."

They placed old Sam in a special chair. His coming had broken into King McCabe's speech. The gambling man stood in front of the fireplace, a hint of annoyance in his eyes. Sam glared at him, then looked condemningly at his neighbors, as much as to say, "We're damn fools to be listenin' to such a man. But let him talk."

Despite Sam's iron-willed cussedness, these men of the basin pool liked him, heeded his advice. Hard hit from a summer drought, they had worked hand-in-glove together. They were strong, silent men for the most part. Mountain men who knew the cow business from the

word go. Big-hearted and loyal, who'd go through hell for a friend.

"Go ahead, McCabe," Sam said icily.

King McCabe straightened, clearing his throat. He was well over six feet, immaculately garbed in a black suit and polished Russian calf boots. As owner of the Buckhorn Saloon in San Marcial, men had seen him win and lose at poker with the same impassive coldness. There was a cultured suavity about McCabe that made men listen when he spoke. Jal Fleming, his house man, was the only man he was intimate with. He had a pale, thin face, an aquiline nose and shrewd, coldly alert black eyes.

"I'll repeat my offer—" he smiled thinly—"for the sake of the late comer. Business is business, with me, whether it is gambling or selling whiskey. Years ago I was in the lumber business. I aim to get back into it. You men are hard hit financially. At your back doors you have timber on your land; properly disposed of, it can grow into a thriving business. . . ."

King McCabe talked on, curt, to the point. From a rear room of the ranch-house came the whimpering cries of fretful children. Not a man of the Cub Basin Pool stirred.

"Again I'll make you an offer that I made a few weeks ago, gentlemen. For the timber rights on your foothill land I'll give you four dollars an acre. Expense in hauling the fallen timber down out of the mountains to Tularosa prevents me from paying more. That is my proposition. It's a chance for you men to come out of the hole. I'd like your answer tonight."

When McCabe finished there was a heavy silence. All eyes swung to Sam, who sat bristling.

"What do you say, Sam?" asked Scott Prather.

Sam looked like a man with gall in his mouth. His voice was like a whip-

lash when he spoke. His face twitched.

"Only this, boys King McCabe owns San Marcial town, lock, stock an' barrel! Damned if I want to see him own Cub Basin. When he gets a foothold here we're through. Mebby that sheriffin' son of mine ain't big enough acrost the britches to hold down your deviltry, McCabe, but I am. Four dollars an acre! Humph! Cut that timber, an' erosions will split our land from hell to breakfast! My answer is this, McCabe—take your offer an' go plumb to hell!"

King McCabe's eyes narrowed, but the set smile stayed on his lips. A murmur rose from the congregated men.

Scott Prather came to his feet. "We'll vote," he said deeply.

"And I'll wait," King McCabe stated coolly.

Slips of paper were passed to the Pool men. They were instructed by Scott Prather to write "For or "Against" selling their timberland. Fifteen pool men scribbled their tally.

Scott Prather and another man counted the votes. When the task was done his voice cut through the tense hush.

"Four for sellin', McCabe. Eleven against, not countin' Sam. It looks," he said slowly, "like the deal's off."

King McCabe nodded, said tonelessly, "Each man to his own convictions. Later, you gentlemen will likely see your mistake—too late. I bid you goodnight."

He pulled on his coat and hat, departed, closing the door behind him. They heard him climb into his buckboard and drive away. Sam faced his neighbors, ill at ease. "You didn't make a mistake, boys," he muttered morosely. "I know we're all broke. I know the hardships ahead. But by the Almighty, this is cow country! That's what it must always be. Tonight Haverty an' his two men are returnin' with our roundup money. When are they due in, Prather?"

"On the ten o'clock train."

"That money will tide us through the winter."

"McCabe can make it tough for us, Sam," a Pool man grumbled. "Some of us have already borrowed money from him. You don't know what it is to see your kids go hungry."

"I know what sufferin' of a different kind is, Talmadge!" Sam barked. "This is a hard land, open to men to claim it. We'll stick together, come hell or high water. None of you will regret it. All right, Clem, I'm ready to go home."

THE meeting was over. Bundled again, Sam was carried out to his rig. He drove back to the Hatchet ranch, a deep glow of satisfaction burning inside him. He came as near knowing peace as he had in many years.

Back in his own ranchhouse he was seated before the fire-place. Clem was with him. Slim was tending to the horses. Sam took a long drink of whiskey to thaw the chill from his bones. He kept staring into the fire, deep in thought.

"How long's it been since I seen Tip, Clem?" he asked.

"'Bout a year, I reckon, Sam," Clem murmured.

"You and Slim ride into San Marcial an' fetch him here."

"When?"

"Tonight! Right now!" Old Sam rapped. "Unh-unh, I'm not out of my head, Clem. I mean it. I want to see Tip. Mebby he's changed since he's been sheriff. Mebby we can talk things over."

Clem gasped in amazement. He sat rubbing his calloused hands together. He looked at Sam and looked away, an uneasiness creeping into his eyes.

"Hurry, Clem. Do it before I change my mind."

Clem rose awkwardly, moved to the door and turned. "Mebby I oughtn't, Sam," he said.

"Go git him!" Sam bellowed wrath-

fully. His eyes were as hard as agates.

Clem went out, closing the door at his back. And for the first time in months, crochety old Sam grinned. Soon he heard Clem and Slim gallop out of the yard, heading for town. Outside, the howling, snow-laden wind grew louder. A strange softness came into Sam's eyes.

"Sheriff Tip," he whispered. "Damn the kid, anyhow. Wild as a yearlin' bull. But what the hell!"

Sam must have dozed for a while. The clatter of horses' hoofs in the yard awakened him. Starting, he spun his wheel chair toward the door. Unmindful of the storm, he jerked open the portal and rolled himself out on the porch. Yonder in the swirling darkness he saw the vague shapes of riders coming toward him.

"Howdy, Tip!" he yelled.

They came closer, those men—slowly moving dark blots in the night.

"Tip!" Sam bellowed. "Clem! What's the matter?"

"It ain't Tip this time, Binford," a raspy-voiced rider called.

Sam stared, trying desperately to probe the inky darkness. Icy fingers of alarm touched his spine. Panic clutched at his heart.

"Who is it?" he tried to bluster. "What you want?"

The riders stopped, twenty feet away. One of them laughed harshly. "We want you, Binford . . . dead!"

Sam's muffled curse died into a gurgle as gun-flames lanced out of the night. His body shuddered with the impact of lead. For an instant horror shone in his bulging eyes. He tried desperately to cry out, to sustain the spark of life within him. Then he pitched over the edge of the porch to the snow-covered ground.

Strangely, he lit on his knees, hands before him, like a man praying. One of the riders cursed and fired again. Sam shuddered and pitched forward to his

face, dead. The shaft of yellow lamplight that speared through the doorway touched him where he lay, arms outstretched in the snow.

One of the riders stirred, his voice a husky croak in the storm. "Never seen a man pray before when he was killed. Never seen nothin' like it."

"Shut up!" another man grated. "Let's get away."

CHAPTER TWO

Renegade Double-Cross

THE cowtown of San Marcial had been built in a cove at the east end of the basin. The railroad, which angled through the mountains, missed it by a little better than a mile. From the town a wagon road led through the timber to a lonely railroad station that stood alongside the track. Here the telegrapher remained on duty until Number Nine came through at ten o'clock.

In the tumbled hills to the south of the railroad lay the badlands. It was a thickly wooded, canyon-gashed region where wanted men hid out. There were all sorts of tales about the badlands. Billy the Kid and Doc Scurlock were supposed to have sought refuge there one winter. Bony Waters, the telegrapher, often told of hearing shots echoing from the badlands. He concocted all kinds of stories about Dutch Heitmann's hide-out shack.

"I don't want no trouble with them tough gents," Bony Waters had always said. "Let 'em stay on their side of the track and I'll stay on mine."

Tonight Waters was inside the lighted station, feet cocked upon the telegraph table, reading. A lone rider eased up out of the brush nearby. He was a bundled young gent with low-pulled Stetson. A rifle butt protruded from his saddle scabbard. Through the snow-blurred window he saw Bony Waters inside.

Carefully, he guided his horse onto the railroad right-of-way, headed down the track. For ten minutes he jogged through the inky darkness. Where the down-sloping track made a curve around the talus of the mountain side he reined in, whistled softly.

Four men materialized out of the night. They came to his side, peering at him. "Everything is all right back there," he said.

"Okay, Tip. You sabe what you're to do, don't you?"

Tip Binford forced a grin. "I sabe, Slade," he said.

"Don't get nervous and blunder."

"Never was calmer, Slade."

Tip Binford rode on down the track a ways, leaving the other men to take their designated places. He pulled off into a piñon thicket, a queer, shaky feeling in the pit of his stomach. The liquor he'd had at Dutch Heitmann's place was wearing off. He remembered the whiskey bottle in his sheepskin pocket and took a big drink.

His eyes stabbed the darkness about him. Wind whined through the cut, whipping snow out of the heavens. Once he cupped a match to take a peek at his watch, but the light sizzled and went out. Later he thought he heard one of the men cough, but he wasn't sure.

Snow began blanketing the ground. Tip Binford shivered. He blew on his chapped hands and emptied his bottle. The holstered six-shooter beneath his heavy coat seemed to be cutting into his aching thigh. Then the raging wind brought the faint whistle of the train as it blew for Sidler's Crossing.

TIP pulled the red bandana from his sheepskin pocket and tied it about his face so that just his eyes showed. His fingers shook a little. The liquor seemed to be curdling on his stomach instead of giving him the warm glow he expected.

Stiffly he dismounted, led his horse farther back in the brush. Then he ran back to where he had a clear view of the track.

Crouched and trembling, he listened to the approaching train. The engine was panting on the up-pull. Far off yonder the headlight beam cut through the stormy night like a shaft of gold.

Instinctively, Tip crouched lower behind the brush as the headlight split the darkness in front of him. Despite the cold, his hands and neck were clammy. His nerves quivered; his tongue felt big and dry. He hoped he had the guts to do what had been outlined for him. He had boasted to Slade and the others that he was tough enough to handle the engine crew.

Smoke and sparks flew skyward as the fireman refueled. The big engine and tender rounded the curve, groaning, snorting up the steep grade. Behind them the lighted windows of the passenger coaches were blurry, vague. Steam hissed and couplings grated. Red slivers of light showed through the cracks of the fire-box like some hellish glow.

Tip fell flat, breath tight-held, as the engine came even with him. The slap and pull of the massive piston arms on the great wheels grated against his taut nerves. Through the cabin window he glimpsed the fireman and engineer. And cold panic rode through him in an agonizing tide. For the first time in his twenty-two years Tip knew the meaning of stark, icy fear. Through the turmoil of his brain a voice kept clamoring: "Get goin', Tip! Now! Now!"

He had no distinct recollection of getting to his feet. The next he knew he was sprinting toward the rear of the tender, clawing up the iron rungs. Then he was on the water-tank, rocking to the sway of the tender, with a cocked six-shooter clenched in his right fist. Cinders stung his eyes as he caught his breath and went on.

In the cab he saw the fireman bang shut the fire-box door with his shovel. The engineer sat in the window seat, one gloved hand on the huge throttle. Both were grimy-faced men in dirty striped overalls. Bandannas hung loosely about their necks. Their cap bills shadowed their eyes.

Tip climbed over the coal, unnoticed. Then he leaped into the cab, crouched and swaying, pistol leveled.

"Hands up, both of you! Stop this train, mister, or I'll shoot!"

Tip's voice was none too steady. Both men whirled, hands jerking upward. Tip saw the fear and amazement eat into their eyes as he snarled another order for the engineer to stop the train.

"I ain't foolin', mister—"

The engineer's face was gray as he turned to the throttle and set the brakes. Couplings jerked. Escaping steam made a screaming sound as the train stopped. From the coaches behind came the muted sounds of turmoil. A man yelled, his voice rifling faintly through the storm. Then four shots rattled out in quick succession, flat and dull.

"Just keep standin' there, you two!" Tip rapped huskily.

The engineer, a gray-haired oldster, gritted: "You'll play hell gettin' away with this, feller!"

"Shut up!" Tip snapped tightly.

Both trainmen stood with arms up-lifted, staring at Tip's masked face. Above the bandanna Tip's blue eyes were a little bloodshot. He heard the sound of men running along the gravel right-of-way. A woman's scream followed another shot. Then men were yelling and gun-fire added to the bedlam.

Out of the night came Slade's bellowing cry: "Let's go!"

HEART hammering Tip leaped to the cab steps, began backing down. When he touched ground he spun and

ran for the curtain of brush. Lead whined around him. As he dived headlong into the brush he glanced back, to see gunflames lance out of the coach windows at him. Men were already tumbling from the cars, racing up and down the track, yelling.

Gasping for breath, Tip came to his feet and plunged into the timber. With yells and gunshots ringing in his ears, he circled to where he had left his horse. Flinging astride, he roared to safety as the shrill blasts of the train whistle rode the gnashing wind. As the sounds faded he looked down to see the six-shooter still clenched in one hand. That hand was trembling—and not from the cold.

He got a grip on himself as he rode deeper into the badlands. The falling snow would soon cover his trail. Holstering his gun, he paused on a spruce-dotted knob to get his bearings. He untied his bandanna, dismounted, crept beneath an overhanging ledge and touched a match to it. He wondered how the other men had fared. Those shots puzzled him. Slade had said there would be no need of a shot being fired.

Back in the saddle, he rode along a winding ravine, following the course of a tiny stream. He didn't take the usual trail through the badlands to Dutch Heitmann's hide-out shack. After a mile or so he dipped into a wooded gully. Down there among the trees lamplight showed at the dirty windows of the barn-like building. The smell of wood smoke was in the air.

As Tip drew nearer he saw the shadowy outlines of the saddle horses at the rear of the shack. A queer uneasiness threaded his nerves. He left his horse in the brush, started forward on foot. A shadow moved in front of him. Tip's gun came into his fist.

"Tip!" a voice whispered. "Don't shoot!"

A cold grin touched Tip's lips as the

figure of a man sprang up out of the brush and rushed up to him. It was Dutch Heitmann, a coonskin cap pulled low over his bald head. He still had his dirty barroom apron tied about his pudgy waist. In the darkness his fat face was white.

"Vait, Tip!" he panted guardedly. "I hide out here to varn you. Something is wrong. I hear tings, Tip, und see tings. I like you, kid."

"Thanks, Dutch. Better duck back inside now. If Slade caught you doin' this he'd shoot your fat belly off."

Tip watched him waddle swiftly back toward the door of his shack. Despite all the rottenness accredited to Dutch Heitmann, Tip felt sure he could trust him. In a drunken brawl at the shack one night Tip had saved the fat renegade's life. And Dutch Heitmann had never forgotten—would never forget.

Rumor had it that years ago Dutch had killed two men in El Paso, and fled. His name was mixed with Slade's in enough shady deals to hang a dozen men. Here in the badlands he was supposed to have murdered an old rancher, burned the house, and made the barn into a saloon. Every out-trailer in the Territory knew of Dutch's place. When things got too hot for them they'd spend a night or two with Dutch, drink yeasty beer and rotgut *pulque*—and pay off.

Dutch kept a close mouth, listened, and seldom drank. More than once an armed posse had closed in about his place. Each time they had found the fat German alone. Each time Dutch had blinked in mock astonishment and whined:

"*Vas iss los, mein* friends? Want someting?"

No one but the owl-hooters who paid off in bloody gold knew of his secret cellar.

Now Tip darted noiselessly around the building. Suddenly he flattened against the plank wall, pistol clenched. Near the rein-trailed horses he had seen a man duck furtively behind a tree stump.

UGLY suspicions and anger beat at Tip. Quietly he slipped around to the front door. Dutch was at his usual place behind the counter when Tip entered. His bug eyes followed Tip across the huge room, past the redhot, pot-bellied stove.

A dark corridor at the rear of the barroom drew Tip. Voices reached him, faintly, from one of the back rooms. Wraith-like, he moved along the dark, narrow passageway. He passed doors that led into side rooms. Ahead, a door leading from the hallway into a back room stood ajar. Inch by inch, Tip crept nearer, until he could see the three men in that room.

"Listen," one of them muttered. "Thought I heard something."

Slade growled, "Just the wind, Draper. We'd hear the kid if he come in the front way. Whitey's waitin' for him out back. Time he was here, though. I was shore I seen him get away."

"Damn, it's cold."

"You're shakin' from bein' scared, Draper."

"Just keep rememberin', Slade—"

"Forget it!" Slade snarled.

They sat around a crude table, the lamp-light shadowing their sneaking, restless eyes. Before them on the table lay a ripped-open money belt. Beside it was a sheaf of greenbacks and gold coins. Slade, the leader, was a hollow-cheeked, unshaven man with quick-blinking rat eyes. Next to him was The Swede, a hulking, brute of a gent, quiet, watchful and deadly. Across from them sat Tas Draper, squat and nervous.

"Better'n ten thousand," Slade said.

"I'll take my share now, Slade," Tip said softly. "I always figgered you had snake blood in your veins. One wrong move an' you'll be first to die."

The three outlaws jerked to their feet, thunder-struck! Tip stood framed in the doorway, six-shooter clenched in his

white-knuckled fist. He stepped quickly into the room as the renegade's hands lifted. Slade's ugly face blanched. He made a sickly effort to bluster.

"You must be outa your head, kid. Here we was a-waitin' for you—"

"To put a bullet through my belly, Slade," Tip grinned mirthlessly. "But your plan didn't work. If there's ten thousand there I'll take a fifth of it. That's my share. Count it out, Slade. Hurry!"

Like a cornered wolf, Slade snarled, "You're makin' a mistake, kid! You can't bluff us! I'll—"

"Hurry, Slade!"

Slade read the death-promise in Tip's eyes. With trembling hands, he counted out two thousand dollars. Tip reached for it with his left hand, stuffed it into his sheepskin pocket.

"Thanks, Slade. Now I'll take your guns."

Each ticking second, Tip knew, brought him nearer a showdown. One by one, he slipped the outlaw's guns from their holsters, tossed them out into the dark hallway. He backed to the door, watching each man, reading the hate in their eyes.

"I'm killin' the first man out of this room," he said. Then he whirled. Slade's frenzied yell sheered through the other men's oaths.

"Whitey! Get the kid! I'll give my share of the loot to the man that downs him!"

Tip was halfway down the corridor when the back door burst open. He spun to see Whitey's gun spurt flame. Lead plucked at Tip's side. Then his own gun was giving answer, driving Whitey to the floor.

Out through the barroom Tip dashed, ears throbbing with the uproar behind him. As he smashed through the front door he heard Dutch Heitmann's guttural cries. Tip leaped into saddle. As the spur-jabbed animal bolted, the saloon doors flew wide.

Slade's rage-filled howl pierced the blare of guns. "Yonder he goes! Get him!"

But Tip was already out of gun range, bent low over his saddle and riding hell-for-leather, praying that his luck would hold!

CHAPTER THREE

Outcast's Return

OUT of the wooded gully and over the snow-blanketed hills, Tip sent his horse hurtling through the night. In the black maw of a deep arroyo he reined in, looked to the loads of his guns.

Soon the biting cold wind bore sounds of pursuit. Tip sat tense in the saddle, listening. The clatter of hoofbeats sounded through the storm. Brush crashed. Not a hundred yards away two horsebackers topped a hill and plunged on.

It was Slade and one of his men. Tip waited until the sounds faded, then rode on down the arroyo. He circled the scene of the train holdup. With the badlands at his back, he crossed the railroad track and rode hard through the dense timber.

In a small canyon a mile from San Marcial he wheeled up at the rear of a dark cabin. Near a leanto he quickly unrigged his horse, carefully rubbed the animal down to remove all signs of sweat. In another ten minutes the thickly falling snow would blot out his tracks.

Hurrying inside the cabin, he lit a smoky lamp and pulled the horse-blanket shades over the two windows. With cold-numbed hands he built a roaring fire in the cast-iron stove. He peeled off his coat, hat and boots and dried them. Then he flopped on a bunk and began reading a week-old newspaper. If his guess was right he wouldn't have to wait long for a caller.

Tip grinned at the way luck had favored him. He remembered the two thousand

dollars in his coat pocket. He got it, stuffed it into his pants pocket. Then the let-down from the ordeal he had been through began sawing at his ragged nerves.

"Get hold of yourself," he muttered. "Let 'em come. They can't find a damn thing to pin on me. Slade an' his killers will never find me here. An' after tonight I'll be gone."

For weeks Tip had planned this night. Now that it was here he didn't feel the thrill of elation he had expected. He brought a whiskey bottle from beneath his bunk and took a long swig. A warm glow of courage filled him; the sickness in his stomach waned.

Then he heard a rider approaching. "Tip!" a voice called outside.

Tip's right hand slid away from the butt of his gun. "Come in, Sheriff," he answered.

A gust of snow-laden wind made the lamp flutter as the plank door opened. A muffled, stockily built, little man stepped inside, closing the door at his back. A silver badge gleamed on his sheepskin.

"Ride out to fetch me a bottle, Sheriff?" Tip grinned.

"No, Tip."

"Trouble?"

Sheriff Will Peabody just stood there, faded eyes stabbing Tip from head to foot. His frost-reddened face was hard. In Tip he saw a strapping, wide-shouldered youth. A handsome, tow-headed young gent with bloodshot eyes.

"Yes, Tip—there's trouble," Will Peabody said softly. "Number Nine was held up tonight—about an hour ago."

"Go on," Tip snapped insolently.

"Two men were killed."

Tip covered up the sudden shakiness in his belly. "Well, what about it?" he muttered. "What you tryin' to do—make it look like I done it?"

"I ain't accusin' you—not yet, Tip. But you might be interested in knowin' that the two men killed were basin men—Joe

Aggers an' Bill Martin. Whoever done the robbin' killed them in cold blood. Several folks knew Aggers an' Martin were fetchin' back the Cub Basin Pool's money. Unless that money is recovered pronto, Tip, it means that your dad an' the other Pool men are ruined. . . ."

STEEL fingers seemed to clamp over Tip's heart. He knew that Slade and the bunch had double-crossed him. Slade had said the mail coach was to be robbed. That was all.

"Why come to me?" Tip rapped bitterly. "You know dad an' I are through. You know I'm washed up in the basin—"

"Yes, Tip," Sheriff Peabody said tersely. "I know all that. You're too weak-backed to stand up an' fight when the goin' gets rough. You walked out on old Sam when he needed you most. An' there never was a finer man ever lived than Sam, with all his bull-headedness! You don't know the meaning of loyalty, Tip. You're a disgrace to the name of Binford.

"I've known you since you was a button. I watched you grow up into a swaggin', cocky-talkin' young fool. You kin out-ride, out-shoot and whip any man in the basin. You sabe the cow business from the ground up. But you've wasted your talents. You've always figgered you could get by with anything because you was heir to the Hatchet ranch. That's all past now, Tip. You're headed for hell—fast! For months you been livin' here like a damned coyote, damnin' the men who were once your friends. Word has reached me that you an' Slade are thick as peas. If that's the case, Tip—"

"About through, Peabody?"

The lawman's eyes held a hurt look. "Guess I am, Tip," he replied. "I've had this on my mind a long time. Tonight I had to get it off."

"Then get the hell out!"

Sheriff Peabody took a step out from the door. It looked to Tip as if he were

going to say something more. Blind anger ripped through Tip. Quick as a flash his rock-hard fist crashed into the lawman's face, slamming him back against the wall.

Sheriff Peabody made a choking sound. His right hand slapped down to the gun beneath his coat, froze there. It wasn't fear that kept him from fighting back. It was a stronger emotion. With one hand he brushed the blood from his lips.

"You'll live to regret that, Tip," was all he said.

Stunned by what he had done, Tip watched Peabody depart. Remorse and shame burned in him like a searing flame. Stubbornly he throttled the impulse to call Will Peabody back. In him was the clamoring urge to tell the game little lawman that he was sorry as hell.

Then Tip cursed himself for going soft. As he heard Peabody ride away he quickly rolled up some of his personal effects in his bedroll. He didn't have much to take along. His hunch had been right that Peabody would make a bee-line for the cabin here when he heard of the train holdup. Tip knew that Peabody suspected him. And in his own quiet way Peabody wouldn't quit until the train robbers were killed or captured.

With his bedroll under one arm, Tip blew out the lamp and hurried back out to the shed. He rigged, thonging the bedroll to the saddle. As he spurred toward San Marcial he reached into an inner pocket of his coat. He felt of the frayed marriage license that bore his and Linda McCabe's names.

AS HE swung around the toe of a hill he saw the twinkling lights of San Marcial ahead through the swirling snow-filled darkness. He struck the wagon road that led into the main street.

On the outskirts of town he passed a log church with a belfry. Adjoining it was a small log cabin where lamplight seeped dimly through the curtained windows.

A thin blanket of snow covered the roofs of the other rough plank houses. On both sides of the street stood the homes of the townspeople, drab, rough-planked buildings that resembled boxes set in a row.

Yonder, in the center of town, loomed the huge, two-story Buckhorn Saloon, its dirty windows like blurry yellow eyes in the night. Drooping-headed horses stood at the hitchrack in front, their tails to the lashing wind. The store fronts were dark, their windows black against the drifting snow.

Down in the center of town Tip wheeled up in the darkness at the rear of the Buckhorn Saloon. From inside came the muted undertone of whiskey talk, the clank and raucous noises of a thriving trade.

Tip tied his horse to a rain-spout, raced down a narrow lane that separated the saloon from a store. At the foot of an outside stairway he paused to glance up at the lighted windows on the second floor. His boots made a crunching sound in the snow as he mounted the steps. On the landing he tapped lightly against an outside door.

"Linda," he called softly.

Back of the portal came the swish of skirts. He called again and a key turned in the lock. Then the door swung open and she stood before him, her lithe figure limned against the light inside.

"Tip!" she cried, surprised.

"Got to see you, Linda. Mind if I come in?"

"I guess it will be all right, Tip."

He stomped the snow from his boots and quickly entered the room. It was a tidily furnished room with a single bed and dresser and rocker. There was something about the place that told of a woman's neat touch. Here Linda McCabe spent most of her days and nights, with her father's room adjoining.

There was a wholesome loveliness about Linda McCabe. King McCabe had tried to shield her from the sordid surround-

ings. He fairly idolized her, little knowing that she had given her heart to Tip Binford. Tip had met her in the mercantile store one day. More than anything else in the world he wanted her. They had met in secret on the outside steps during the summer nights.

"Tip," she said breathlessly. "You shouldn't be here. Dad's downstairs. He just got back from a meeting out at Prather's ranch. I—"

"Get on your coat an' hat, Linda."

"Tip, what's the matter?" she asked quickly.

He laughed as he had always laughed when he was playing his hand the limit. He knew she hadn't heard of the train robbery or she'd have mentioned it.

"Nothin'," he said evasively. "I just want you to go with me."

SHE stood before him, her eyes strangely haunted, the lamplight shining in her golden hair. She seemed to be searching his very soul.

"You in trouble, Tip?"

He shook his head. He tried to tell her that it was nothing to be afraid of, that they'd just go for a little walk. She hesitated, puzzled, worried by Tip's strange request.

"I'll go, Tip," she said finally. "I know I can trust you. But I'll have to hurry back."

"Sure," he said queerly.

He helped her on with her coat. Then they were outside, closing the door behind them, rushing down the snow-covered steps. Tip felt a tremor pass through her as he gripped her arm.

"I'd best get my horse while I got the chance," he told her.

Before she could protest he hurried her to the rear of the saloon. He snatched loose his horse's reins, leading the animal, as he fairly ran with Linda through the snow-filled night. The raging wind lashed at their bent bodies. Tip led the way

across a vacant lot to the street front.

"Tip, where are you taking me?" Linda cried.

"Not much farther," he grinned.

They met no one as they hurried on up the street. Most of the homes were dark now. It was late. Tip, peering ahead, made for the small cabin that stood beside the church. He tried to forget that two basin men had been killed tonight. The train robbery was an ugly nightmare that he'd forget in time.

"Wait, Tip!" Linda gasped pleadingly.

But Tip didn't halt until he was in front of the cabin alongside the church. There at the front gate he drew her to him, the tide of his stormy emotions giving way to words.

"Listen, Linda. You told me once if I'd settle down you'd marry me. I'm holdin' you to that promise . . . tonight! I'm goin' to quit drinkin'. An' I'll settle down. You an' I will settle down together—away from here, some place where I can start off with a clean slate. I've got enough money now. We can go back to town an' get a buckboard."

She strove to release herself, recoiling from his very savagery.

"Tip, you don't know what you're saying!"

"Yes I do, Linda. You're marryin' me!"

Tip swept her into his arms. In long strides he bounded up to the front of the

cabin and kicked at the door. In the raging storm he didn't hear the two men gallop past on their way toward the center of town. Nor did he heed Linda's sobbing pleas.

"Parson!" he called. "Parson!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Poverty Basin

PARSON FULLER opened the door. As the lamplight fell upon Tip and Linda he drew back, one hand lifting to his thin face.

Tip stomped quickly inside, kicking shut the door at his back, placing Linda on her feet. He drew from his pocket the frayed marriage license, handed it to the gaping parson.

"Linda an' I want to get married, Parson," he snapped. "Get the Good Book—an' hurry!"

Parson Fuller's stricken gaze shuttled past Tip to Linda, who leaned weakly against the door.

"But, Tip—" he stammered.

Linda's hysterical laugh made Tip whirl. She was laughing with her lips, but not with her eyes. There was something almost pitiful in her silent, white-faced stare. She was suddenly like a little girl who sees her playhouse of ideals and dreams and hopes topple to earth.

"No, Tip, we're not going to get mar-



ried—now or ever. Dad was right in what he told me about you. Promises mean nothing to you, Tip. You'll always go smashing through life, grabbing what you want, drinking, fighting, with no thought of others." A sob choked in her throat; her lips trembled. "Remember that, Tip—and forget that you ever knew me!"

She flung open the door and was gone. A gust of wind made the lamps sputter. Parson Fuller quickly closed the door. But Tip didn't move. Humiliation and anger stormed through him in a fierce tide.

"She's right, Tip," Parson Fuller murmured.

Tip whirled, raging. "What the hell do you know about it?"

Parson Fuller was a frail little man. But the hard rock foundation of his convictions gave him strength. With steady fingers he slowly tore the marriage license into bits.

"All I know is what I've observed, Tip," he said sadly. "Inside you is some iron work that needs tempering. Your greatest battle is with yourself. You lost the sheriff's election to Will Peabody by eight votes. I don't mind telling you I voted against you, for I knew what would happen if you won. Since then—"

They heard the slog of horses' hoofs outside and Parson Fuller stopped. Through the storm came a man's voice.

"Tip! You in there, Tip?"

Burning with futile resentment, Tip yanked open the door, strode out toward the gate. Beside his own horse he recognized Clem and Slim, the two old Hatchet cowboys. With them was Sheriff Peabody.

"Hey, Tip!" Clem shouted. "Sam wants to see you. Me'n Slim met the sheriff downtown. He said he thought he seen you headin' up this way."

Tip found it hard looking into the lawman's eyes. He knew that Peabody had evidently been following him since he left his hide-out cabin.

"Don't know what old Sam wants, Tip," Clem went on. "Been actin' kinda funny tonight. Made me an' Slim ride out in this damn storm for you. Wouldn't listen to reason."

Tip swallowed hard, fighting against the old stubbornness. He'd vowed in the past he'd never return to the ranch. But now—"I'll ride out an' see him," he said.

HHE MOUNTED and loped away with the three men, his head bent against the blasting gale. He was chilled to the bone, trembly inside. Thoughts of all that had happened weighed upon him. He wondered what fool notion had prompted Sam to send for him. More than that, Tip wondered why he was answering his father's call. Likely all he'd get would be another word-lashing.

Tip kept staring straight ahead, unmindful of the other men. They were halfway across the basin when Sheriff Peabody called a halt. He wheeled up at Tip's stirrup. His eyes didn't leave Tip's face as his gloved hand removed the badge from his coat.

"Here, Tip," he said flatly. "Pin this on you."

Tip stared uncomprehendingly. "You crazy, Peabody? It's your damned star. Wear it."

"It *is* my star, Tip—an' I'm proud of what it stands for. Mebby it ain't legal for me to do this. Mebby we've all been damn fools in deceivin' one of the finest old gents that ever lived. But I'm askin' you to wear it tonight for Sam to see. Then I'm askin' you to clear out of this country an' never come back. Sam will probably never live to know the difference."

Tip barked, "You mean—"

"Sam thinks you were elected sheriff, Tip. You'll probably never understand. But we done it for old Sam—not for you. His heart an' soul was set on you winnin' the election ag'in me. It was his one pray-

er that you'd pin on this badge an' be a man. Some of us boys figgered it'd be best to let him think you'd won. He's never been to town since. An' the rotten lie we've all lived still holds, with him."

Stunned, Tip watched Sheriff Peabody pin the badge to the front of his coat. A hard lump rose in his throat. He wanted to protest, but the words wouldn't come. Clem and Slim watched, their chill unfriendliness toward Tip very plain.

"Let's go," Clem gruffed.

Tip spurred toward the night-shrouded foothills, struggling against his swelling emotions. He didn't know what he'd say to Sam. He felt only the soul-stirring urge to hurry.

Through the hurtling snow he glimpsed the lighted windows of the Hatchet ranch-house. Home! The very word fetched poignant memories. Then he noticed the front door standing wide, a shaft of light spearing out into the yard. He saw the empty wheel chair in the shadows of the porch. Then he saw old Sam's sprawled, snow-covered body near the steps.

"Dad!"

His hoarse cry died, a half-moan, half-sob. He hit the ground running. As he knelt beside the stiffened body he saw where the blood had stained the snow. He barely heard the other men's startled yells as they raced to his side.

THROUGH misty eyes, Tip stared down into his father's upturned face. He saw where a bullet had ripped through the oldster's chest. And the full shock of his grief struck Tip harder than any physical blow he had ever known.

"I've come back, Dad," he choked, "too late."

"Old Sam's been murdered," Sheriff Peabody kept repeating. "Somebody's killed him since you an' Slim left, Clem."

Tip rose stiffly, the body of his father in his arms. "Who would have done it, Sheriff?" he asked huskily.

"I don't know, Tip," the lawman croaked.

Tip strode inside the house. He laid the body on the sofa and covered it with a blanket. Sheriff Peabody sent the two cowboys roaring away to spread the news to the neighbors. He rebuilt the fire in the fireplace.

"Most of the basin men," he said, "are probably at Scott Prather's place. I sent word out to them when I heard of the train holdup. They'll be here purty soon. I aim to turn this basin inside out, Tip. We'll clean out the badlands, too."

Tip turned, his face deadly white. He unpinned the badge on his wet coat and handed it to the lawman.

"I won't be needin' it now, Peabody."

After that Tip sat in a chair beside the sofa, his hat on the floor beside him. Something was happening inside of him. He didn't know what it was. He looked up into Sheriff Peabody's faded eyes; he saw the lawman's bruised lips where he had struck him earlier tonight.

"I'm everything you called me tonight, Peabody," he said slowly. "I'm rotten as hell. Tracin' down dad's murderers an' killin' them is all that matters now. When that's done I'll leave Cub Basin forever."

Sheriff Peabody remained silent, a lonely little man who somehow seemed wholly inadequate for the lawman's job.

Tip's eyes were dull and staring. Later, when Clem and Slim rode up with a score of basin men he didn't glance up. Soon the big living room was filled with men, their faces drawn with emotion, their eyes hard. Tip felt their accusing eyes upon him and heard their hushed talk.

Tip rose, went into the kitchen to be alone. But here he found Scott Prather, Owen Talmadge and Bass Mortimer talking, trying to plan.

"Come in, Tip," Prather said, not unkindly.

Their talk ceased. Tip turned on his heel, went into an adjoining room. It had

been his bedroom once. In the chill darkness he could see that the furniture was just as he had left it. He heard Scott Prather's droning voice resume.

"It's no use, boys. We're whipped. It's either accept King McCabe's thievin' offer of four dollars an acre for our timberland or starve. We sold every head of available stock to pull out of this hole. Now that money is gone. Aggers an' Martin are dead. Old Sam was murdered. . . ."

His despondent words trailed out.

MURMUR of other talk echoed throughout the great house. A posse had been formed in town, someone said. At dawn they were planning to scour the badlands. Cowmen, long suffering from Slade's rampaging, were taking the law into their own hands. Slade and his cut-throat bunch likely had a hand in the train holdup.

Questions hammered through Tip's seething brain. He wondered who had killed his father. And why. So much had happened since he had left the ranch.

He heard Scott Prather and the other two Pool men return to the front room. A booming, familiar voice came from up there. Tip stepped into the bedroom doorway, peered down a gloomy corridor.

Yonder, in the front room, Jal Fleming—King McCabe's partner—stood facing the assemblage. His coat and hat were wet with melted snow. He was a massive-bodied man, bull-necked, over-bearing. He had a flat, broken nose and furtive, little eyes. With guns and mauling fists he maintained a semblance of order in the Buckhorn Saloon.

"It's too bad, gents," he was saying ponderously. "Just got word of what happened, an' rode out. If there is anything I can do—"

"Not a thing, Fleming," Scott Prather said softly.

Jal Fleming shrugged. He said he wanted to be neighborly. Said he had

heard of the tight the basin men were in financially.

"You can do what you please about acceptin' King McCabe's offer for your timberland," he continued. "In the meantime I might be of some help. Ain't got a lot of money. But I might loan you a little."

"A little won't help us now, Fleming."

Jal Fleming said but little after that. When he left, Tip slipped out the back door, unmindful that he had left his hat in the front room. Gone was the swagger in Tip's shoulders, the cocky erectness of his head. Gone forever was the mighty pride that had once ruled him. Bitterly, he realized that his father might still be alive if he had stayed on the ranch. More than that, Tip knew that he'd had a hand in smashing the basin men who had been his friends.

"I've been an awful fool, Dad," he murmured. "I'm not askin' for forgiveness. All I want is the chance to square the debt with your killers."

There was a lump in his throat that choked him. He reached his horse and started to mount, when a stir made him turn. Out of the darkness came Sheriff Peabody.

"Where you goin', Tip?" he asked.

"I'll leave you an' Prather to handle things here, Sheriff," Tip said evasively. "There's a chore I've got to tend to."

"You'll be back?"

"Sometime after daylight."

For an instant the two men's eyes met. Then the little lawman turned back toward the house, as Tip spurred away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back-to-the-Wall Cowmen

HALFWAY to town, Tip turned toward the badlands. He took a shortcut through the hills, spurring his horse through the deep drifts of the canyons. At a spot below the scene of the

train holdup he crossed the railroad track.

Dawn wasn't far off. The arctic wind had waned; snow had ceased falling. Tip tried to erase from his mind the images of his father, and Linda McCabe—and failed. Like a consuming flame inside him was the urge to rectify the damage he had done the basin men.

With that haunting thought in mind he headed boldly for Dutch Heitmann's saloon. As he drew near the wooded cove he loosened the six-shooter in his holster. Shadows of night were fading when he came within view of Heitmann's place.

Yellow light still shone at the dirty windows. Not a soul was in sight. Snow had obliterated the hoof marks of the night before. An ominous silence shrouded the place, touching Tip's spine with ice. His six-shooter was clenched in his fist when he dismounted near the door.

He stole forward, primed for any trap. Pushing open the door, he stepped inside—and froze! The glassware back of the

crude bar had been smashed. In the center of the barroom floor lay Dutch Heitmann, arms out-stretched, his head in a grotesque twist.

Tip paced forward, peered down into the dead man's wide-open eyes. Dutch Heitmann had been shot once in the back of the head. His body had been dragged out into the middle of the floor. The entire barroom was a shambles.

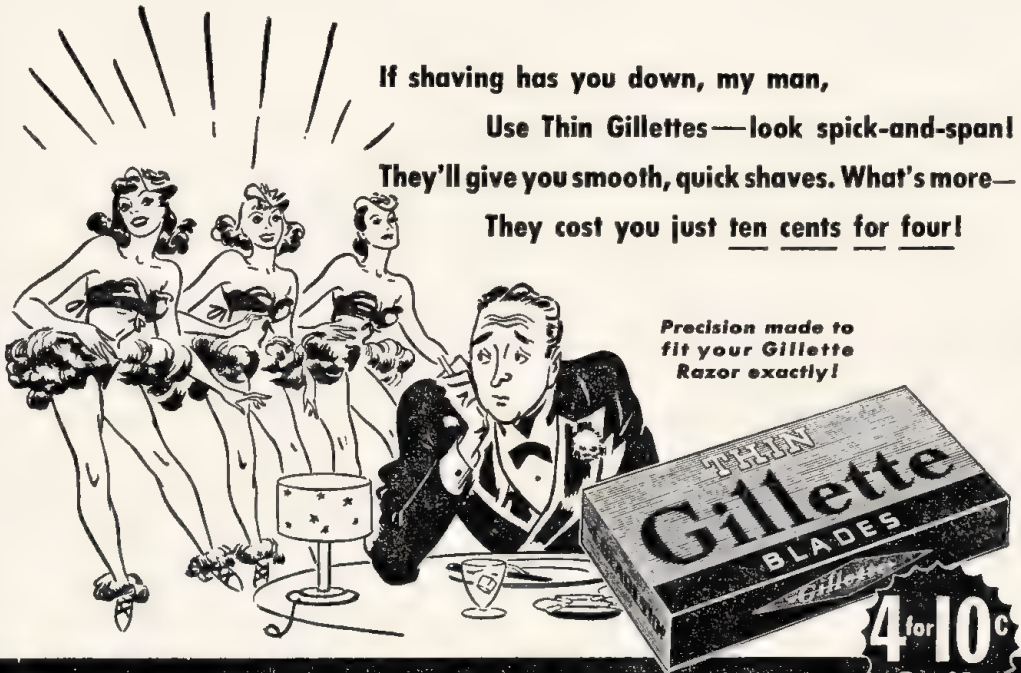
Sickened by the sight of the murdered man, Tip quickly searched each back room. He knew that Slade and his bunch had killed Heitmann. More than once Slade had threatened the fat saloonman's life.

Back outside, Tip mounted his horse and rode away in the hazy light of a wintry dawn. Every muscle of his big-framed body was stiff from the cold. The icy wind ruffled his hair. His bloodshot eyes searched each tree trunk and boulder as he cut a wide circle toward San Marcial.

The town lay under a smothering blanket of a six-inch snow. There was no,

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Use Thin Gillettes—look spick-and-span!
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one along the main street. Smoke curled lazily from some of the house chimneys. Smell of cooking food lingered in the crisp air, making the gnawing ache in Tip's stomach more acute.

The Buckhorn Saloon dwarfed the other buildings. The windows were dark. Over the panes on the second floor, blinds had been drawn.

Tip left his horse at the hitch-pole, waded through the drifts to the front door. His knocking finally brought the sleepy-eyed, buck-toothed barkeep to the door.

"What you want, Binford?" he growled.

Tip wedged his way into the gloomy barroom. "Tell King McCabe I want to see him, Shorty."

"I'll play hell! Mister McCabe an' Jal Fleming are both in their rooms asleep."

Shorty, the barkeep, swallowed hard as Tip's six-gun jammed into his ribs.

"Tell McCabe I want to see him," Tip ordered.

"Why, sure I will if that's the way you mean it, Binford," Shorty gulped.

He sped across the barroom as fast as his stubby legs would carry him. Mounting a stairway to a balcony, he raced toward the door to King McCabe's room. Tip leaned back against the vacant bar. With a pang he looked at the door of Linda's room.

Shorty soon came back down the steps, grumbling to himself. Shivering from the cold, he went back of the bar and poured himself a drink.

"Mister McCabe will be right down, Binford," he grunted disconsolately.

TIP sheathed his gun. When King McCabe appeared on the balcony he was wearing a heavy robe. The puffy sacks below his glittering black eyes were noticeable. His thin, sharp face was pasty, sleep-lined. He stopped in front of Tip, hands in the pockets of his bathrobe.

"I seldom get up for my friends this

time of morning, Binford," he said icily. "Never for a person like you. What do you want?"

Tip matched his calm. "Want to see you, McCabe. Alone."

McCabe hesitated, then said, "Let's go to my office."

He preceded Tip across the barroom. Tip knew the gambler gripped a derringer in the pocket of his robe. And he knew that McCabe would kill him, if given half a chance.

At the rear of the saloon, McCabe maintained his office. In this box-like, windowless room were a black safe, odd chairs and a desk. As he and Tip entered, he lit a bracketed oil lamp, closed the door, quickly built a fire in a pot-bellied stove. Frosty breath escaped his tight lips as he straightened.

"Now what, Binford?"

"I've got two thousand in cash on me, McCabe," Tip explained. "It's—"

"Hot money?" McCabe smiled mockingly. "It couldn't be the train holdup money by any chance, could it?"

"That's for you to guess, McCabe! If it is, it wouldn't be the first hot money you've handled. Our hate is mutual, tinhorn—remember that, an' listen. Two thousand won't help me. Four thousand might. I want to stake my dinero against your like amount. One cut of the cards takes all. What do you say, McCabe?"

"Trying for a real stake to skip with, Binford?"

"No, McCabe. I'm stayin' in Cub Basin."

King McCabe grinned mirthlessly. "Lay out your money, cowboy."

"An' you yours, tinhorn."

Tip kept his right hand close to the butt of his gun, as his left hand drew the roll of bills from his sheepskin. McCabe sidled over to the safe, bent, twirled the knob, and brought out two thousand in cash. He tossed it on the desk top beside Tip's money. Cards were found in a desk draw-

er—a new deck with glossy, red backs.

McCabe shuffled them. In the tense silence the two men's eyes met again.

"Cut, McCabe," Tip said softly.

The gambler's long fingers touched the cards, cut lightly. His expression didn't change as he tossed over his top card. It was a nine of clubs.

Tip drew a four of hearts.

They stood there, their hate filling the room. With one hand McCabe raked the money towards him.

"I win, Binford. What now?"

Tip knew he had lost fairly. His voice was steady when he spoke. "You probably heard that dad was murdered tonight, McCabe. The Hatchet ranch will go to me now. In the past you an' Fleming seemed to have a hankerin' for ranch land. I'll sell out tonight—cheap."

McCabe sneered. "You are desperate for money, aren't you, Binford? But I don't want your ranch. Furthermore, it might interest you to know that I'm leaving San Marcial one of these days. And I'm taking my daughter with me. I heard about you trying to force her to marry you tonight. She talked me out of killing you—"

"You're easy talked out of some things, McCabe. Next time use your own judgment."

Tip backed out the door, stalked out through the barroom past the staring bar-keep.

OUTSIDE, he mounted and rode out of town. The sun was already up, shining down on a world of glistening white. Pines and spruce stood out blackly against the snow-covered hills.

Tip's eyes ached from loss of sleep. The prickling sense of remorse grew within him. He thought of his father's money that he had squandered in the past. Of the wild, foolish things he had done that had precipitated his break with Sam.

As he drew close to the ranch he saw

the buckboards and saddled horses near the porch. The yard was marked with tracks. A wagon, belonging to Jed Miller, the coroner, was among those vehicles.

Tip stabled his horse and entered the house through the kitchen door. Owen Talmadge's wife and two other toil-bent basin men's wives were busy around the wood stove, boiling coffee, washing dishes. In their harrassed eyes was anxiety, worry. They didn't speak as Tip made his way into the front room.

Here were six or eight menfolks, their tanned, gaunt faces hard as burnished stone. Whang-leather men, they were, with their backs to the wall. Among them was Sheriff Peabody. Coroner Miller had removed old Sam's body to a back bedroom.

Ignoring the strained silence, Tip called Sheriff Peabody into his own bedroom. There, behind the closed door, the little lawman didn't ask Tip where he had been. But Tip sensed the oldster's relief.

"Now tell me more about McCabe's offer, Peabody," Tip began quietly.

Briefly, Sheriff Peabody told of the summer drought the basin men had been through. Beef losses had been heavy. They had pooled their salable stuff, shipped by rail to Fort Worth.

"That Pool money was their only salvation, Tip. Cub Basin is finished as a cattle empire, because of that train robbery. All your dad's hopes for the Hatchet are gone. As for McCabe, he's been naggin' the boys to sell him their timberland for a song. There's a fortune to be made in them trees, haulin' them down to the saw-mill in Tularosa—an' he knows it. But the boys are still dead set ag'in sellin. They're cowmen—not lumberjacks. They know that if them trees are cut, erosion will soon ruin the basin."

Sheriff Peabody talked on, his voice low. He said some of the basin folks were at Agger's and Martin's ranch, doing what they could. Some of the cowmen had rid-

den into the badlands at daylight, in search of Slade's bunch.

"The funeral will be this afternoon, Tip," Peabody concluded, after a pause.

Tip held his silence. He ate but little that noon, avoiding the other men, ever conscious of their stares. In the eyes of those men he knew he was an outcast. Their demands of a man were high. And Tip didn't measure up.

The sun hid itself behind scudding clouds that afternoon. Under leaden skies, Tip rode at Sheriff Peabody's side at the rear of the procession. Grim-faced ranchers with their bundled womenfolks rode in buckboards, following the coroner's wagon that bore the three coffins.

At the log church there was quite an assemblage of basin folks and townspeople. Rigs and saddled horses filled the yard. The church bell tolled mournfully. In the little cemetery at the rear of the church three graves had been dug in the frozen ground.

There were no long-drawn eulogies. Just plain simple words spoken by Parson Fuller, who stood at the heads of the graves, Bible in hand.

"God has given," he murmured reverently. "And God must take." His eyes turned to Tip in contemplation. "Blessed is he who abideth by the laws of God and man. . . ."

The men stood dry-eyed, silent. The women wept. A child tugged at her mother's frayed coat and sobbed. The bell tolled. The town appeared gripped in a tension. Threat of doom seemed to hover over all like some great, black vulture.

It was as if a tightening band was closing about Tip's heart. He stood through the service, head bare, bitter-eyed and rigid. When it was over he strode to his horse, mounted and rode down to town.

IN FRONT of the bank he racked his horse and went inside. In a private office he found Banker Stillman poring

over some ledgers. He was a full-fed, content man, sleek and shrewd. When Tip told him he wanted to sell the Hatchet ranch the banker smiled deprecatingly—an oily grimace.

"Sorry for all you've been through, Tip," he purred. "I'd come to the funeral if I could've got away. Busy as the devil these days. Sell the Hatchet? Why, son, what have you got to sell? The land? You have no cattle left. What few you have are in the hospital corral at Talmadge's place, starving. The house itself and buildings are worth nothing. As for land, it's open for those strong enough to claim it."

"Then a loan—"

Banker Stillman grimaced. "Son, this summer I was fool enough to lend money to a half dozen of the basin men. They're all mortgaged to the hilt."

Tip rose, watched the heavy-jowled banker get to his feet. He bridled his flaming temper.

"Forget it, Stillman," he said, and walked out.

Evening was already spreading its dingy mantle over the town. Tip stopped near his horse, as a shoddy, canvas-topped wagon creaked down the street, drawn by a span of ribby mules. On the seat sat a small-string basin rancher and his dull-eyed wife. Two children's heads showed behind the flaps, pale, frightened. A horse and milk cow were tied to the end-gate.

The grizzled rancher saw Tip and stopped. "Guess we'll be pullin' out, Tip," he said tiredly. "If it don't snow no more we'll be through the pass by mornin'."

Tip said, "Good luck, Lawson."

He watched them creak away until the gloom hid them. Lights blinked on in some of the stores. Two men rode up in front of the Buckhorn Saloon and went inside. A buckboard and team rattled up to a stop in front of the mercantile store. Old Owen Talmadge climbed out, went inside.

An urge to talk to Talmadge sent Tip striding down the walk to the store front. Inside, he saw Talmadge greet the spectacled storekeeper. The front door stood ajar. The mercantile owner's whining voice carried outside.

"I've gone the limit, Talmadge. Wish I could help you out with more credit, but I can't."

Tip stepped into a vacant doorway as Owen Talmadge came out. There was a beaten, hopeless look about the poverty-ridden old rancher. He climbed into his buckboard and drove back out of town. Then Tip went back to his horse.

As he mounted, a movement at one of the windows over the Buckhorn Saloon drew his attention. He looked up to see Linda standing there, watching him. Flushing, Tip turned his head and spurred out of town.

Through the gathering night he took the wagon road that led to the railroad station. He found Bony Waters, the telegrapher, hugging the stove, eyes uneasy with fear. It took Tip only a few moments to explain his visit.

Bony Waters wagged his head dolefully. "To haul the logs by rail means cash on the barrel head, Tip," he said. "We couldn't take no lien on the lumber. Hell about the holdup, wasn't it? Slade done it, I betcha. They can't find hair nor hide of him or his bunch. I've heard King McCabe made you all an offer for your timber. Why don't you take it?"

Tip's eyes burned. "Waters, I wouldn't sell out now for a million dollars. An' I'll do all I can to keep the others from sellin'. You can take your railroad an' go plumb to hell!"

CHAPTER SIX

New Plans

TIP left Bony Waters gaping. Mounting, he turned back toward town. For Tip the past twenty-four hours had

been the bitterest he had ever known. Yet from some source he found solace, new strength. It was as if Sam were at his side, his phantom whisper of encouragement guiding Tip. A stir of that deathless, fighting spirit that had been Sam's was like an awakening bell in Tip.

"I meant that about not sellin', Dad," Tip gritted. "I'm goin' to hold to the Hatchet or go down fightin'. Some day it'll be the ranch you tried to make it." A lump formed suddenly in his throat.

But Tip found no surcease from his damning torment. In his mind constantly lurked the knowledge that some day Slade and his bunch would be killed or captured. If they talked, Tip would have to pay for his folly.

In San Marcial, Tip found Sheriff Peabody in his office, talking with one of the returned possemen. It was patent that no trace of Slade's bunch had been found. Scowling, the posseman departed. Alone with Peabody, Tip's crackling words tumbled out.

"Keep the basin men together, Peabody! Don't let them sell to McCabe! If the weaker ones want to be bunch-quitters, let them go. But the ones that want to fight for their right to live like men, tell them to stay!"

"Tip!" Peabody gulped. "What the hell's come over you?"

"I don't know, Peabody. It's kinda like I was seein' things for the first time. Cub Basin is cowland. Dad fought an' slaved to build it up. So did some of the others. An' cowland is what it is goin' to remain. My plan is to sell just enough timber to restock an' keep from starvin'. The railroad won't haul for us, because we're busted. So we'll team it through."

Sheriff Peabody's mouth was open, his eyes wide. "You're loco, Tip. You could never team logs out of the basin this time of year."

"I'm ridin' to Tularosa, Peabody," Tip rapped staunchly. "If the lumber mill

there will give us a price that's right we'll get the logs down to them, come snow, hell or high water. Do as I say, Peabody. You've got influence with the Pool. *Keep the fighters together!*"

"Tip—"

"Give me a day to get there an' a day to get back!"

Tip was already slamming out the door. At a hole-in-the-wall cafe he ate a hurried meal. Then he was in the saddle, riding at a pace-eating lope through the hills to the eastward.

Soon the lights of the town were lost behind. Ahead, the tree-lined wagon road lay like a dim white ribbon. A cruel wind, hinting of more snow, plucked at Tip's aching body.

Deep in the tumbled mountains he came upon the wagon belonging to the basin man, Lawson. With a lighted lantern held high, Lawson answered Tip's "hallo." Lawson was in the seat by himself. His wife was in the rear of the wagon, nursing a sick child.

"Turn back, man!" Tip barked hoarsely. "You'll never make it, Lawson. Another storm is comin'!"

"Then where you goin'?" Lawson countered.

Quickly, Tip summarized what he had told the sheriff.

"Runnin' like a whipped coyote will gain you nothin', Lawson," Tip shouted into the wind. "Go back to your spread. Sheriff Peabody will see that you don't starve till I get back. Somehow we'll get enough lumber out of the basin for us to start anew. We'll fight . . . an' win!"

Lawson's eyes shone bright in the lantern glow. "Ma!" he croaked. "Ma!" His voice broke. "We're goin' back. We're goin' back home."

A woman's cry of gladness came from the rear of the wagon. Cracking his whip, Lawson turned his team around in the narrow road. Tip spurred on into the black maw of the storm-threatening night.

MINUTES wore into hours as Tip urged his tiring horse on. Part of the time Tip dozed. Then he'd jerk awake, startled, to feel the torment of his throbbing body. Sometime after midnight he reached the pass in the peaks. The treacherous, slippery trail out of the mountains lay before him. He felt a tightness bunching his stomach muscles.

Dawn finally broke, dismal, dreary. Tall pines gave way to scrub piñon and cedar. Here the snow lay in scattered patches upon the frozen ground. Far down through the haze, Tip saw the great expanse of Tularosa Valley, where the winters were milder. Greasewood and mesquite dotted the endless sandhills, giving the valley a greenish hue, a friendly, languid hue.

Tularosa lay just beyond the edge of the foothills, a scatteration of 'dobe homes and stores. As Tip rode into the outskirts people were already stirring about. A steam whistle at the saw-mill struck its sharp blasts. The scream of huge circular saws wailed lustily, ebbed and flowed like some monster in distress. About the scattered lumber piles men and teams were starting the day's work.

Tip made straight for the saw-mill office. He stumbled when he dismounted. A clerk led him into the superintendent's office. Tip found him to be a level-headed business man with a jutting jaw. Tip introduced himself and explained his mission.

"Sure, Binford, we'll buy all the lumber you can haul to us. That Cub Basin timber is crackerjack stuff. I'm just hoping you can get through all right. You look half dead, man. Better rest a while."

"I'll do that when I get back," Tip told him.

Footage price was mentioned. It was more than Tip had hoped for. Never before had it occurred to him that there was a wealth of timber owned by the basin men.

In an hour Tip took his leave, stopping only long enough in town to wolf some food and drink some coffee. Then he was back in the saddle, turning toward the hills. He didn't feel half as tired now. A fierce, wild exultation filled him.

"If it'll just hold off snowin' a few days," he muttered.

The trip back took longer. All through the night Tip rode like a drugged man, afraid to stop, lest his courage would fail. Sleep tugged at his eyes. Every nerve and muscle screamed for a rest, but he went on. Minutes, hours were precious. His jaded horse's pace grew slower.

Another dawn came. Tip had little recollection of going through the pass. When he saw San Marcial in the distance he tried to shake the fog from his mind. People along the street stared at him. One glance at the sheriff's office told him that Peabody wasn't there. So Tip made inquiry at the livery stable.

"Peabody must figgered you'd come here lookin' for him, Tip," the barnman said. "He left word that he'd be out at Talmadge's ranch. Say, they ain't found Slade yet. Damn funny, if you ask me!"

Tip got a fresh horse. He looked like a dead man—all but his eyes—as he rode out of town. At Owen Talmadge's Circle-Cross ranch Sheriff Peabody was first to see Tip as he rode into the yard. He rushed out of the house, several men following him.

"Tip!" he blatted excitedly.

Tip slid awkwardly from the saddle, touched the ground and fell. It was all a little blurry to him after that. Willing hands helped him inside the house. The heat from the stove sickened him. Owen Talmadge forced him to lie down on a sofa. His hands and feet were bathed in cold water.

"You're plumb tuckered, Tip," old Talmadge told him. "Catch some sleep. We'll call a meetin' of the basin men for tonight if that's what you want."

"Lawson got back?" Tip asked drowsily.

"He an' his family is at Prather's place, makin' out all right."

Sleep claimed Tip. For hours he lay unconscious of the stir about him.

AT NIGHTFALL Tip awoke, stiff and sore. Hot broth poured strength back into his body. He noted a new friendliness about Owen Talmadge.

"Just save what you've got to say till the other men get here, Tip," Talmadge said quietly. "Sheriff Peabody told us what you had in mind."

That night every Pool man in the basin met at Talmadge's ranchhouse. Fighting men, they were, gun-heeled and grim. At Scott Prather's bidding, Tip faced them. He told of his plan, told of what he had learned in Tularosa. When he had finished there was no show of enthusiasm among the men.

In the silence, Scott Prather rose. Since Sam's death the mantle of leadership had fallen to Prather. His face was deep-lined with worry.

"Such a plan will never work, Tip," he said skeptically. "Another storm is brewin' that'll block the pass. Anyhow, we're cowmen, not lumbermen. We don't know the first thing about teamin' out logs."

Tip's words were like a whiplash. "Then we'll learn, Prather! We'll beat the storm! We'll sell just enough timber to put us on our feet again. I'm askin' six men to go with me—take six wagons an' twelve teams. An' I mean men with guts enough to go down fightin'! Forget McCabe's offer!"

A murmur lifted from the assembled men. Then Sheriff Peabody was on his feet, eyes blazing. "Count me in, Tip. I can appoint a deputy to handle local affairs."

That broke the ice. Other men agreed to try Tip's proposition as a last resort. Like drowning men, they were grasping

at straws. Plans were made; four basin men without families were chosen to accompany Tip and Sheriff Peabody.

"Our success or ruin is up to you, Tip," Owen Talmadge said feelingly.

"We'll make it, somehow," Tip said. "We've got to!"

When the meeting was over, Tip saddled for a return to his ranch. Sheriff Peabody rode with him part of the way. The little lawman made no mention of the proposed trip. He told how one of his posses had swooped down on Dutch Heitmann's place. They had found Heitmann dead.

Later, as they parted, Peabody said warningly, "King McCabe ain't goin' to relish the ideer of us sellin' lumber an' him losin' out. He's treacherous as a snake, McCabe is. Keep your eyes peeled for trouble, son."

"I will, Peabody."

The two men's hands met in a strong clasp. The lawman's strange actions puzzled Tip. He wondered if Peabody knew that he'd had a part in the train holdup.

Tip loped on across the basin toward home. He was just rounding a small butte when a warning bell clanged in his brain. Something moved among the boulders ahead. Then gun-flame, the spiteful crack of a rifle sheered out of the night as Tip hurled himself to the snowy ground.

He hit hard, the breath gusting from his lungs, as his spooky horse bolted. Then his own gun was giving answer. Flat on the ground, he fired three times.

Cautiously, Tip crawled forward, gun gripped in front of him. Ten feet away he saw the bushwhacker's sprawled body in a rocky crevice.

Tip bent over the body, quickly cupped a match. In that brief yellow flare he saw the man's face, and stiffened!

"Whitey!" he gritted softly.

Whitey was one of Slade's ace gunmen. One of Tip's shots had put a hole through his forehead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death Rides the Blizzard

FOR an instant black panic filled Tip. Then he was calm. Slade, he guessed, had sent Whitey to kill him and retrieve the two thousand holdup money. That meant that Slade and the others of his bunch were still in the vicinity, and probably dangerously close.

Tip decided to play out his string boldly. Since Sam's death Tip had known the depression of a guilty conscience. Sometime he'd let it be known that he had been in on the train holdup. He'd take his medicine like a man. But before he confessed he wanted to find the murderers of his father; he wanted to see the basin men back on their feet.

Sheathing his six-shooter, Tip raced through the brush to where his horse stood with reins snagged. Returning to the outcropping of rocks, he quickly laid the dead outlaw across the saddle swell. Nowhere did he spot the renegade's horse. The boulder stretch was bare.

At a jog Tip headed toward town. Swelling hoofbeats came out of the night toward him. He reined in, right hand slapping down to his gun. He recognized the approaching rider then. It was Sheriff Peabody.

"Tip!" he shouted. "I heard some shootin'. Thought mebbey—"

As he wheeled in he saw the dead man across the swell of Tip's saddle.

"It's Whitey—one of Slade's bunch, Peabody," Tip said grimly.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"He tried to bushwhack me . . . an' missed."

Sheriff Peabody asked for no further explanation. He said he'd take the body on into town. When the dead man was transferred to his horse he looked queerly at Tip.

"If Whitey proves to be one of the train holdups there'll be a bounty on his head, Tip. The railroad is offerin' five hundred dollars for each of the stickups—dead or alive."

"That's something to work for," Tip said levelly.

"It shore is," the lawman replied.

Both men climbed on their horses and departed. Tip headed for his ranch. Light showed at the windows of the bunkhouse, but the main house was dark. As he was stabling his horse Tip saw Clem come toward him from the bunkhouse with a lantern.

"Lawyer Gates rode out this afternoon, Tip," the oldster explained. "Wants to see you. Said there was some papers to be signed."

Tip thanked the cowboy and went into the house. In the chill darkness it seemed that the phantom presence of Sam was beside him, whispering encouragement. For the first time in many months Tip slept in his old bed. The trouble that obsessed his spirit filled his dreams. And through it all was the haunting memory of Linda McCabe.

At dawn, Tip was up, riding into town, signing the necessary papers at the lawyer's office. Returning to the ranch, he and the two Hatchet cowboys worked like mad, preparing for the trip. Hay rigs were dismantled, gear and harness mended. Sturdy oak beams were used to

build log wagons. Horses were shod, wheel felloes straightened, to the ring of the anvil in the blacksmith shed.

Under storm-threatening skies, Tip rode to the other ranches, to find similar work going on. It was a forced enthusiasm he found among the other basin men. Some of them brooded skeptically, squinting off at the snow-covered peaks.

"Hope you're right, Tip," they said.

WITH saws and axes, a force of cowmen was dispatched to the hills. Tip worked with them, doing twice his share, sawing the fallen trees into logs. Axes rang and chips flew to the snowy ground. Cursing, perspiring men lashed straining teams as logs were dragged to the basin floor, where the wagons could be loaded.

Hurry! That was the word that passed among the men. A cruel biting wind whined out of the north towards evening, seeming to whisper of disaster. But in spite of it Tip's hope lasted. That night he and the two Hatchet cowboys worked by lantern light, finishing the wagons. Long past midnight they sought their beds, too weary to eat.

Breakfast was a cheerless meal. Deep lines of anxiety etched Tip's gaunt, unshaven face. His body screamed for the soothing balm of whiskey, but he fought down the craving. All that day he and the other men slaved, loading the wagons, making last minute preparations. Sheriff



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Peabody was there, saying nothing of the train holdup, doing his share.

Night fell, ominous and dark. A last-minute meeting was called at Scott Prather's ranch. Tired-eyed, nerve-torn men dragged themselves there. Tip's amber-flecked eyes glowed with determination as he faced the group. He figured it would take two days to reach Tularosa with the loaded wagons.

"We'll be back within five days. The money we fetch will tide us all over till Spring. If we can make the pass before the storm breaks, we're safe!"

Parting words were few. The entire assemblage rode to where the loaded wagons were waiting. Snow began falling before they reached there. But no man made mention of it. Whooping and eager, the four teamsters Tip had chosen climbed up on their wagons, adjusting their bedrolls.

Tip took the lead wagon. Sheriff Peabody rode the one behind. Each man was supplied with a lantern, food and water. Scott Prather was last to grip Tip's hand.

"Everything depends on you now, son," he said deeply. "If you need help along the line, send for us. God go with you . . . *an' hurry!*"

Tip nodded. He took his seat and waved. Whips cracked along the line. Men yelled. Wheels crunched in the snow and the heavy chains holding the logs in place creaked as the wagons rumbled away.

Across the basin, Tip led the way toward the road that angled through the hills to the eastward. He waved his arms and kicked his feet to keep up circulation. Looking back, he saw the lanterns and the dim figures of the other drivers atop their loads.

"We'll make 'er, Tip!" Sheriff Peabody shouted.

Tip grinned. Late that night they came out on the wagon road and began climbing. Once Tip stopped to give the straining

teams a breather. Then they forged relentlessly ahead.

Higher into the timbered hills they climbed. The snow fell thicker. Drowsiness stole over Tip until he sang and yelled in order to keep awake. Through frosted lids he peered through the wall of white at the dim trail ahead. He lost track of time.

ON A precipitous rim he called a halt. Sheriff Peabody and another teamster came up to Tip's wagon. Into the face of the raging gale the old lawman shouted.

"How much farther to the pass, Tip?"

"Another hour. Keep goin'!"

Again they were in motion, the horses lunging into their collars. Death beckoned from the yawning black chasms as the lurching wagons trundled on. Tip groaned, noticing the deepening drifts in the road. The wind beat a dirge in his ears.

Doggedly he kept his mind on his task, fighting against the drowsiness. Later, when he glimpsed the hemming walls of the pass ahead, he uttered a hoarse cry of joy. Jaded horses were given another rest, while half-frozen men met in a huddle at the rear of Tip's wagon.

"Snowin' like hell now, Tip," Peabody yelled. "From here on it'll be worse."

"You've nothin' to gain or lose by goin' ahead, Peabody," Tip snapped. "You've still got time to go back."

"I asked for it, cowboy," Peabody grinned. "Lead on."

They rolled on, horses stumbling in their gear, men cursing, firing their pistols into the air. They plowed on into the thickening snow. Only men of iron and rawhide courage would have kept going. Sick with fatigue and exposure, they halted at dawn in a sheltered creek bottom.

With stiff, numb fingers, Tip built a fire. Horses were fed. The men chewed on jerky, and boiled coffee, thawing

around the crackling fire. The four red-eyed men who had volunteered for the trip tried valiantly to keep up their spirits. But the promise of the terrible ordeal ahead put fear in their eyes.

"Let's go, boys," Tip said.

The blizzard broke in all its fury that morning. It screamed and shrieked through the canyons. In places where the drifts were belly-deep, Tip and the other men walked, stumbling, falling, yet going on. When a wagon got stuck all six men shoved at the wheels.

One of the teamsters, a wild-eyed youth, fell and struggled to his feet, shrilling, "God, Tip, we'll never make it! To hell with the lumber! Let's cut the teams loose and try to save ourselves!"

"Keep goin'!" Tip ordered thickly.

With the wagon loose, they battled their way down treacherous slopes, through piled drifts. They were on a wind-swept mesa when the flat, dull crack of a pistol shot penetrated Tip's dulled senses. He whirled, looked back as the driver of the last wagon screamed and toppled from his perch. Then a dark blot of horse-backers swept up along the line of wagons, firing, yelling.

Tip's right hand dove frantically for his gun as the riders whirled nearer through the blinding storm. Pistols flamed. White-hot pain stabbed at Tip's shoulder. Bullets whined about his head. He fired once. Then his precarious footing gave way.

DOWN off the slippery logs he fell, striking the wagon wheel. But even as he fell he glimpsed Sheriff Peabody and three of the other drivers leave their wagons, dash frenziedly for a protecting ledge. A great roaring filled Tip's ears. And through that roaring sheered a man's jubilant bellow.

"Let them other yella-bellied rabbits go, fer the time bein', boys! Let's finish Binford!"

Dazed, Tip reared to his feet by dint of sheer will. Like a tall, gaunt scarecrow he stood there, refusing to believe his eyes. The four riders had left their horses, were lumbering toward him.

"Slade!" Tip managed.

Slade's bearded face was an ugly mask of hate. With him was the thick-witted Swede and Tas Draper. The other man was a scar-faced tough Tip had seen hanging around the Buckhorn saloon.

"Shore it's me, Binford!" Slade snarled. "Let's hear you squeal. Thought you'd get away with some of the train money, didn't you? Your payoff's in lead, Binford—just like your old man got it."

"Slade, *you* killed dad!"

Tip saw his accusation hit home.

"Shore I did, Binford—at King McCabe's orders! I done it just before we met the night of the holdup. Since the train holdup we been hidin' out in the cellar of the Buckhorn Saloon, laughin' at the law. How's that, feller? An' you tried to get McCabe's daughter to marry you! McCabe's the best friend we got, Binford. He paid us to beef your old man. Sam Binford woulda been alive today if he hadn't tried to buck McCabe. McCabe wants the timber in Cub Basin."

The truth hammered through Tip's chaotic mind. He saw Slade's trigger finger tighten.

"*Bueno*, boys," Slade bawled. "Let him have it, an' then git the others!"

Rage was a spur to Tip's strength. With the speed of a springing puma he hurled himself to one side, rolling.

Then he was shooting, cursing and laughing his defiance at the men who had him cornered. Desperately he tried to down Slade. But the outlaw's figure seemed to dance in front of Tip's eyes. The scar-faced renegade fell. Tas Draper bent in the middle and pitched into the snow on his face.

Sudden shock filled Tip's brain with red fire. With a sob he tried to stay on

his feet. Swirling shadows engulfed him as he lurched forward and fell. All strength drained from him, but he clung tenaciously to the thin thread of consciousness.

In that damning state of helplessness he wondered when the final shot would come. Death held no fear for him now. Far greater torment was the knowledge that he had failed the basin men, that Slade was still alive.

He had no idea how long he lay there. Every fibre of his body screamed in pain. Blood blinded him. Then a figure was bending over him, bathing his face with snow.

"Tip! Tip! Don't die, son!" Sheriff Peabody was saying. "When I saw you fall, I ran. God forgive me for it, boy. You shot down two of them hellions. When I seen what was happenin', I downed another one. The fourth skunk got away."

"That must've been Slade.

Tip tried to sit up. A gurgling cry from one of the fallen outlaws made him and the sheriff turn. There in the snow, not ten feet away, lay Tas Draper, his eyes wide with liquid horror.

In his dying breath he cried, "I didn't kill him, Tip! Slade done it. Slade killed old Sam Binford. Never seen a man pray before when he was dyin'. Old Sam was on his knees a-prayin'. . . ."

Death stopped Tas Draper's words. His eyes closed and his body relaxed.

SICK and weak, Tip tried to explain to Peabody all that Slade had boasted of just before the showdown. The three remaining teamsters hurried up, shame-faced, beaten.

"They killed Bob," one of them said. "Bob was ridin' the last wagon."

Sheriff Peabody spread out a blanket beneath the wagon, laid Tip on it. One of the killers' bullets had cut an ugly gash across the side of Tip's head. Peabody

bound the wound the best he could. A fire was built, the teams quieted.

"Rest, Tip," Peabody admonished hopelessly.

Weariness engulfed Tip. He closed his eyes, barely conscious of the men moving about him. The last he remembered was one of the men saying the storm was abating. When he awoke, Peabody was still bending over him. The other men were looking to the horses.

"That's the first time I ever run from trouble in my life, Tip," Peabody husked contritely. "I won't again. I swear. There's some things I oughta tell you, Tip. Old Sam musta had a hunch he was goin' to die. A week or so before the end, he called me out to see him. He made me promise I'd look out for you. Sam thought a lot of you, son. He was the closest friend I ever had."

Tip understood a lot of things now. The undying loyalty of Sheriff Peabody was something he'd never forget.

"You might as well know the truth, too, Peabody," he said weakly. "I was with Slade an' the bunch on that train holdup. He didn't tell me he was goin' to rob the basin men, though. The plan was to rob the mail car, with no gun-play."

"I kinda figgered you was in on that deal, Tip."

"An' you—"

"I made a promise to Sam, Tip. My hunch was that you'd come out a man if I could just keep you from bein' killed in the meantime. I'm not blind, son. All along, I suspicioned that King McCabe was harborin' Slade's bunch, but McCabe's been too slick to get the goods on him. McCabe is behind all the hell we've had in Cub Basin. Those sneakin' eyed, gun-heeled hombres that hang around his place are all on his payroll."

"I aim to kill Slade an' King McCabe before I die, Peabody," Tip muttered.

Strength seeped back into his throb-

bing body. Despite Peabody's protests he crawled to his feet, jaw muscles tight in his white face. With fumbling fingers he reloaded his gun, a plan flashing to him. The awe-struck teamsters quickly surrounded him.

"The storm is over, boys," Tip gritted. "We're not quittin' now. After tonight there'll be peace in Cub Basin. Put Bob's body on top one of the wagons. We'll unspan his horses, hook three of them to the tail of the front wagon. Leave his wagon here, for the time bein'. If you take it careful you'll be in Tularosa by mornin'. You boys are goin' ahead—*alone!*"

"Tip!" Peabody blurted. "What—"

"I'm goin' back to San Marcial."

"Not by yourself, you ain't, son!" Peabody swore fiercely. "Three wagons can go through this load. We'll come back for the others later. If snakes are dyin' tonight I want a hand in it!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Town of Flaming Guns

CUB BASIN lay blanketed in the deep snow. As night fell a coyote howled mournfully from a high ledge, its eerie cry like a whisper of doom. Lights twinkled in the scattered ranchhouses, where poverty-stricken cowmen waited—and prayed.

At the east end of the basin San Marcial's frame buildings stood heaped with drifts. The snow along the main street was pocked with hoof marks. Windows of the two-story Buckhorn Saloon glowed with light. Saddled horses stood at the hitchrack. From inside came the strident noise of drinking men.

Strange things were happening in San Marcial tonight. From the edge of town a lone rider spurred toward the saloon. His horse stumbled, almost fell, as it reached the tie-pole. Stiffly the rider slid to the ground, staggered to one of the

windows and peered in. A bloody streak showed across the man's cheek.

It was Slade.

The hard-faced men lining the bar whirled as the front door crashed inward. They saw hollow-cheeked, grizzled Slade standing there, his matted hair disheveled, his rat eyes twitching.

"McCabe!" he croaked. "Where's King McCabe?"

Jal Fleming barged forward, swearing, yanking Slade toward the rear office. . . .

* * *

In her room, Linda McCabe sat shivering by the small stove, a shawl about her shoulders, the lamplight reflecting the gold in her hair. She looked pitifully small and child-like, just sitting there, her hands clenched in her lap. In her eyes was all the grief and despair a woman can bear.

Above the muted uproar downstairs she heard someone mounting the outside stairs. She came to her feet, pale with fright. Then she heard her father's guarded call just outside the bolted door.

"Linda! Let me in . . . quick!"

She rushed to the door, opened it. King McCabe stepped inside the room, his shiny boots wet with snow. His broad-brimmed hat was pulled low. A long fur coat made him look even taller and thinner. All the suavity was gone from King McCabe.

"I told you I'd take you away from all this sometime, Linda," he said sharply. "The time has come. We're leaving. Grab your things."

"Dad, what's happened?"

"Nothing. Only hurry!"

"You're keeping something from me, Dad! You know something about Tip—"

"Tip Binford is dead, Linda."

Linda uttered no sound. Her face went white as the snow. All the life seemed to drain out of her body. Then her eyes flew wide with sudden realization. Fiercely she clenched King McCabe's arm, her voice hysterical.

"Dad! You've killed him!"

"No, Linda, Jal Fleming had Slade kill him."

Linda drew back, shaken. Sobs wracked her as she stared at the transformation in King McCabe. He laughed—like a gambler who has lost his last white chip. And Linda recoiled from him, one hand crushing her lips.

"Don't be afraid of me, Linda," he kept saying.

She stood rooted with horror as he came nearer, laughing crazily and talking. He wasn't quite steady on his feet. A queer, pinched look was on his pallid face. Then, as he stopped in front of her, she saw the blood dripping from the fingers of his left hand.

"Dad!" she sobbed. "You're hurt!"

"Listen, Linda, cases are closed with me. It's you I'm thinking about. Jal Fleming and I just had a little tussle in the back office. He'll kill me if we don't get out. Jal Fleming is not human, Linda. He's a rotten beast.

"I'm telling you the truth tonight, Linda. In God's name, listen. And if anything happens to me, you get away. I'm low, honey, but I'm not all snake. Years ago Fleming and I were in prison at the same time. I escaped, but he served his time out. Since then he has held the threat of exposure over my head. I've been his front man, his brains, using my name to operate his filthy business. So long as I played his rotten game I knew you were safe. I knew there was no getting away.

"There's one chance in ten we can make it tonight, Linda. I've got a buckboard ready—a little of my own money saved. Fleming and his killers are downstairs, priming themselves to take over the town, the whole basin. Fleming is mad! He'll own Cub Basin and the lumber if he has to kill every rancher."

They both heard the inner door open—and whirled. Linda screamed. King Mc-

Cabe stood like a man paralyzed by shock, his left arm hanging limp.

"Fleming!" he said, his voice a ghostly whisper of hate.

BIG Jal Fleming stood framed in the portal, a cocked pistol in one huge fist, his snake eyes writhing. His flat-nosed face was ruddy with the stark, raw passions of a killer. His thick lips were pulled back over his yellow teeth in a gloating grin.

"You all through, McCabe?" he leered.

McCabe didn't have to answer. A gust of wind made the lamp sputter. Linda was first to see the man on the outside stairway—a gaunt scarecrow of a young gent who looked as if he had been dragged through the coals of hell. Beneath a stained bandage his eyes were burning pools.

"Tip!" Linda screamed.

Tip Binford, crouching outside the door, heard that scream as if it were far away.

"I heard all you said, McCabe."

Jal Fleming fired first. Like a raging beast he came to his senses, bellowing, shooting. King McCabe spun and fell. Lead jarred into Tip's left shoulder as his own gun bucked. Never had he shot faster or straighter. Into the bedlam of that room he charged, driven by some mad impulse to smash and kill.

Through the boiling smoke he saw Jal Fleming rock backward, both arms waving, like some monster that wouldn't die. Tip fired and fired again. Out on the balcony, Fleming toppled back against the wooden rail. With a crash it gave way, and Fleming fell end over end to the barroom below, his body bullet-riddled.

Somewhere out of the pandemonium sheered Slade's cry.

"It's Tip Binford! Get him!"

Yelling and shooting, Fleming's gunmen charged up the barroom stairway as Tip flung the lamp through the window.

Vaguely he was aware of Linda at his side. Quickly he shoved her into one corner as bullets ripped in through the open door.

"There's no runnin' now, Linda!" he called.

Yells, shots echoed from the street. Fleming's men were already clamoring up the outside stairway. Tip knew they were trapped.

His fumbling fingers reloaded. At Linda's stricken cry he turned, to see King McCabe's dim figure crawling toward them. The pistol in his hand gleamed.

"I bet high and lost, Binford. Don't shoot!"

He turned and fired as blurry figures charged into the outside doorway. Then Tip was at the gambler's side, emptying his gun at those figures in the dark portal, hurling himself to one side as a bullet tore into his thigh. With senses swimming, he tried to rise, but his strength was gone.

"Tip! Tip!"

Dazedly he heard Linda calling to him. Dimly he heard the swelling rumble of hoofbeats and shots down in the street below.

"It's help, Tip!" Linda sobbed.

Her arm was about Tip, half-supporting him, as he dragged himself to one of the smashed windows. Down there along the dark street thundered the basin men, guns flaming in vengeance payoff. Like rampaging ghosts they came, taking no prisoners, smashing forever the yoke of Jal Fleming's lawless rule. In the lead was Sheriff Peabody, riding to glory, his six-gun spewing.

Tip felt no pain. Thankfulness stormed through him in a wave of emotion. He heard Linda whispering to him, felt the warmth of her tear-stained lips against his.

"I love you, Tip. I always have. . . ."

Then out of the darkness came King McCabe's voice. It was the voice of a dying man, uncomplaining at the deal Fate had given him.

"You don't need to be ashamed of her, Tip. She's as fine and good as they make them. . . ."

His words faded. And the only sound in that room was Linda McCabe's low sobs.

SHERIFF Peabody and Owen Talmadge were the first to reach them. The town didn't sleep that night. Towns-men and cowmen intermingled in jubilant celebration. They were still noisy when the sun rose, shining like a benediction upon a range that would know peace forever.

Out at the Hatchet ranchhouse, Sheriff Peabody and Linda were finally left alone with Tip, who was in bed. The old lawman's eyes were misty, warm with pride.

"You'll be up in a few days, Tip," he murmured. "Your debt to old Sam is paid. You killed Slade as he tried to storm into Linda's room after you. The train holdup money was found in Fleming's safe."

"All I hoped to do is done, Peabody. I'm ready to face—"

"The job ahead of you now, Tip, is to take over where Sam left off. It'd please him mightily, knowin' you done that. It's the way the basin men want it." Peabody paused, looked away. "There's some reward money that won't come in amiss either, cowboy. The men that held up the train are *all* dead."

Tip's heart was too full to speak just then. When Sheriff Peabody left the room he looked up at Linda. He'd never seen her quite so beautiful. She was flushed and smiling, her eyes filled with a glorious promise.

"Think you'll like it out there at the ranch, Linda?" he asked her.

She nodded. "I'll love it, Tip," she said.

Epic novelette of
cowland courage

Boothill



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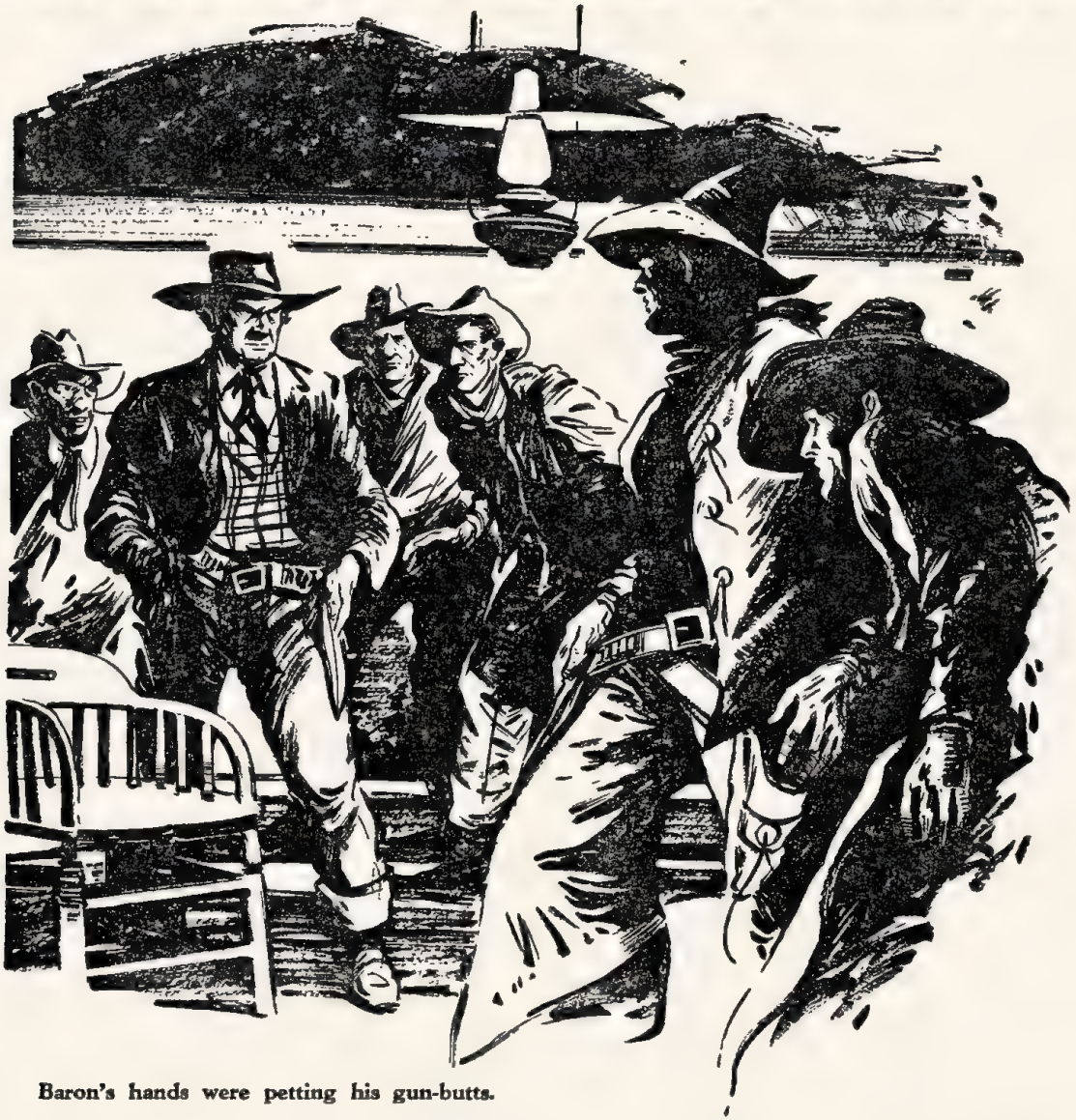
driven their covered wagon and settled when he was but a stripling. Thought of them now brought an ache to his throat and he remembered once more how they had suffered during that long Montana winter before pneumonia finally stilled their hearts, and how, desperate and alone, he had offered his inheritance of the F-Bar spread to old Sam Carson of the Circle C at his own price.

He had hated the *Valle del Oro* then, for all its rugged beauty had faded with

the death of his parents. In his young grief he could only see that it had taken them from him, left him alone in the world. But wise old Sam had understood and countered with his own proposition. "Get away from this country for awhile, son," he had said. "Go out an' see other ranges. Time dulls a man's heart an' someday the F-Bar'll call you back home. Meantime, I'll lease your range an' care for it like I would my own."

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through Cole's mind as he gigged through the white moonlight that made the trail ahead appear as if carved from ivory. He could see clearly the twin pinnacles beyond, markers where the trails forked, one branch leading on to Buckhorn, the other turning toward the *Valle del Oro*.

The night was quiet and he heard no sound, yet he became suddenly aware that the ears of his fine, golden California palomino were held stiffly forward as he approached the deep shadows surrounding the pinnacles. Suspicion jerked Cole's thoughts from the past immediately and then he thought he observed a movement in the shadows. Instinctively his fingers dropped to sweep back the open front of the gray serge coat he wore. Hand coming to rest on the carved bone handle of the Colts at his thigh, he allowed his mount to go on gingerly. The years had taught him caution and a hard self reliance. His code was to be ready always for anything, and he didn't know what might have come over the *Valle del Oro* since his departure.

But he knew, after a moment, that he was not prepared for what happened. A rider, slim as himself at the waist and as broad through the shoulders, nudged a black mount from the shadows. The rider wore garb as dark as the horse.

"Hold up, stranger," he said in a flat voice, and blocked the trail.

Cole saw instantly that his hand, too, was on his holstered gun. An electric tension built up between them. Firm lips thinned, Cole kept riding forward thinking this gun-guard on the trail was an odd reception committee. The man could not be intent upon robbing him, or he'd have drawn his gun to back up his orders. And then in the clear moonlight he saw the black-garbed rider's shoulders hunch in surprise. The man straightened quickly as if from a blow in the chest.

"Cole!" he breathed. "Cole Flint! Good Lord! What are you doin' back here?"

The pale light caught beneath the brim of his hat and showed Cole a bony, tight-lipped face, and for a moment it was the visage of a stranger, the years had changed it so much. Then shock of recognition came to him and brought a gasp from his fine, hard lips.

"Tom Bachelor!" he exclaimed in disbelief. "My God, fella, what's happened to you?"

ASTONISHMENT at the rider's very appearance made his eyes bug, then tighten. Questions came at him in a rush and he wondered what had come over the Buckhorn country and the people in it to make them change so radically. The past came rushing back to him again. Tom Bachelor had been a slender stripling like himself when he had left the *Valle del Oro*. He had been a blond, open-faced youngster then. But eight years had wrought many changes in him. They had both been sixteen. Now they were twenty-four and the stamp of the gun-hawk was plain on Tom's lean face. He had the look of a killer and Cole caught the impression that there was nothing but hate in the man now, hatred for himself as much as for the world at large.

Impulsively he kneed his mount alongside the other's horse, trying hard to mask the surprise that gripped him. He stretched out his hand. "Tom," he said quietly, "it's mighty good to see you again. Imagine meetin' you out here, though. How come, fella? Why are you night-ridin' the Forks?"

Hesitantly Tom reached for Cole's hand and then his fingers knotted into a fist and fell back at his side. "I'm not fittin' to shake hands with a yellow dog, Cole," he groaned miserably. "I . . ."

Before he could continue they heard the sound of shod hoofs on the trail beyond the pinnacles. Watching him, Cole saw his old friend whirl, hand once again settling over his gun heel. Then the rider swept

into view and Cole knew it was a girl.

He saw she was rather tall and the moonlight revealed feminine curves that even a yellow blouse and riding skirt could not hide. As she drew nearer his eyes widened again at the changes time had wrought here. When he saw her more closely it made him conscious of the years he'd been away.

She was Sam Carson's daughter, Beth. Red-haired and freckled, she had worn levis and shirt the last time he'd seen her, and the fact that she'd been born a girl seemed a major tragedy to her. She'd been a tomboy. They'd teased each other and they had fought, and there had seldom been a peaceful word between them.

The girl reined down at sight of them blocking the trail. Her cool gray eyes swept over Cole and instead of the smile of welcome he had expected, her lip curled scornfully.

"Well, well," she said biting, "if it isn't the prodigal returned home. From the

fine looks of your rig, Cole Flint, you don't need any of King Baron's money. But gold has always bought guns."

Time had evidently not softened Beth Carson's hot tongue nor hot temper. And it had not changed the big man facing her much either. Cole Flint had always hated mystery, and this homecoming was filled with it already. The antagonism that had drawn them irresistibly together as youngsters and yet at the same time kept them apart, brought a hot reply to Cole's lips.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about, Beth," he said sharply. "My guns have never been for sale, and aren't now. I don't even know this King Baron you speak of. So what right have you got to get hasty with your tongue?"

"I hate a liar, Flint," the girl said contemptuously. "I see you with Tom Bachelor here, and that's enough to damn you in any honest man's eyes!"

Mystery was piling on mystery. Time, Cole could see, had evidently brought

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many changes to this high upland country. Questions churned in him, but before he could voice any of them, Tom Bachelor's flat, emotionless voice broke the taut silence between these one-time friends.

"Miss Carson," he said formally, "I'm here to see that no one rides the *del Oro* trail tonight. Take my advice and go back to Buckhorn."

Icy laughter, that yet, Cole sensed, had a tinge of fear in it sheered from the girl. "I don't take my orders from King Baron, yet. Go back and tell him that, Bachelor!"

Cole saw her booted heels rake silver spurs into her dun mount's flanks, as without even a glance at him she reined to the right, striking into the *del Oro* trail.

Silence held them both for the space of time it took the echo of her passing to drift beyond hearing, and then Cole turned toward the trail-guard, a sudden, hard impatience rising in him.

"Tom," he said almost roughly, "what's this all about anyway? Why should Beth get her feathers up at me? And why in hell should you be sitting out here ordering people around?"

Tom Bachelor's lips thinned to a fine white line. Cole watched him turn and cast a glance over the empty country about them, and suddenly he could almost feel the fear in him.

"Cole, you've got to get out of here," Bachelor spoke the words rapidly, as though afraid that something might happen to still his tongue. "Go back where you came from. Things have changed here. If you're the man you used to be you won't like the new order, and the answer to those that don't is usually a quick grave. That's all I can tell you, fella. Ride out now and don't come back!"

Cole brushed the rush of words aside, impatiently. "Why shouldn't Beth ride home if she wants too?"

"I don't know," Tom Bachelor said in a shaken whisper. "Before God, I don't. My orders were to keep the *del Oro* trail

clear tonight—and those are the orders a man gets when The Hand's gonna strike!"

CHAPTER TWO

Del Oro's Gibbet

A DESIRE to laugh almost overcame Cole's reserve. This warning was plain and yet it sounded like one of the fantastic horror games he and other *del Oro* ranch youngsters had played as kids. But a look at Tom Bachelor's face stilled that urge to laugh. Tom was deadly serious.

"That's my word to you," he said flatly. "Ride out while you can, Cole."

Swift change crossed Flint's big-boned face. He felt his muscles bunch with sudden, hot anger. "I guess," he said deliberately, "you better save your orders for those who will listen. Tell this Hand, I'm ridin' any trail I want to ride, and if he or this Baron you work for, or any other man hurts that girl or one she loves, I'll not stop till I get him or he gets me!"

"You always had a temper," Tom Bachelor said dully. "God help you, Cole! Ride with your gun in your fist—though I'm afraid it won't do you much good."

Cole Flint hardly heard those last words, for he had already twitched his golden palomino, Eureka, into the *del Oro* trail. His urgent hand on the reins, and a low word was enough to lift the big horse into a gallop, and yet the unreasoning fear in him was so strong that the fast pace seemed slow by comparison.

Now at last, with the sharp wind of his ride roaring in his ears, Cole admitted to himself the real reason for his return to the Buckhorn country. A stubborn man, it had taken this warning of danger to make him admit his feelings. For it was Sam Carson's red-haired daughter who had brought him back. On many a lonely night along the Chisholm Trail, she had

come like a vision of hope to make the hardships of the Long Drive seem worth while. In Dodge and Ogalalla, the lure of liquor and painted ladies had meant little to a lonely young puncher with his mind full of dreams. The end of the rainbow had always beckoned, and the mighty Overland Trail had called him to California, to the rainbow's end on the shores of the Pacific. He had watched tall ships sail through the Golden Gate, laden with treasures a lusty young state had the gold to buy. And with the cash he hadn't spent in the wild trail-towns, Cole Flint had bought and sold, and been ready to gamble with his gun or gold, for the things men brought home from across the sea.

Much of that gold was in a strong-box now on the Buckhorn-bound Wells-Fargo stage. For Montana had kept calling him. He had told himself that he wanted to see old friends again, see once more the frowning scarps of the Moguls and the pinion-stippled ridges above the *Valle del Oro*. But that had been only part of it. Now he was ready to admit that he had really wanted to see what kind of woman the years had made Beth Carson.

And as though his thoughts had met hers, the sound of a scream came whipping across the rugged crest toward which he was riding. Thin as a knife-blade and as sharp, terror had ripped that cry from a girl's throat. From Beth Carson's throat, because there'd be no other woman on the *del Oro* trail tonight.

The thought sent the blunt Spanish rowels on Cole's heels slapping back into Eureka's flanks. The big palomino snorted, for he was not used to this kind of treatment.

Thin and far that terror-filled scream sounded again, and then Eureka was across the summit of the sharp crest, and the white moonlight showed Cole the dip of the trail, and the flat beyond.

Out there near the center of the flat were

the twisted remains of a lightning-riven pine, its stumpy limbs arching above the *del Oro* trail. Black against the white moonlight as figures cut from crepe-paper, Cole saw Beth Carson's brown mount pitching like a cayuse with a burr under its blanket. The girl was riding out the bucking horse with the automatic ease of a born rider, for even from here he could see that her attention was not on the pitching animal. Her head was turned toward the old tree, and to the thing dangling from a lower limb. Cole needed no closer look to know that it was the body of a man—hanged by the neck above the *del Oro* trail!

THE thought sped through his mind that this was what Tom Bachelor hadn't wanted Beth Carson to discover. He had known this dead man was here. Or had he? Cole recalled the look of fear on Bachelor's face, the bitter self condemnation there, and his words warning him away from the Buckhorn country. He had spoken of a new order here, an order Cole Flint wouldn't like. A taut, mirthless smile, turned the prodigal's lips. If this was the new order Bachelor had referred to, he didn't like it!

Beth Carson had mentioned some gunboss by the name of Baron, that Bachelor worked for. And Tom had said that he'd had orders to keep the *del Oro* trail clear because The Hand was going to strike. It tied Baron and his gun-hawks, and this Hand into a tight bundle. Farther than that, he couldn't go now. But the determination rose strong in Cole Flint to run this thing to ground.

Eureka swept up beside the girl's pitching bronc, and for a short time Cole had his hands busy quieting her mount. The presence of death had spooked the animal, but gradually Cole's strong fingers on the bridle brought the dun to a stand. Still trembling with fright, the animal quieted finally and Cole crowded Eureka

around to face the girl. He could see that she was close to fainting. Her gray eyes were wide and staring. Laxly her fingers clutched the nubbin of her kak. Her face was paper white. She seemed completely unaware of his presence.

"Beth," Cole said sharply. "Get hold of yourself!"

He waited until he saw her eyes come into focus, her sagging shoulders stiffen, and then for the first time he turned his gaze toward the riven pine.

A vagrant breeze turned the figure slowly in a ghostly sort of dance, and then the dead man's face came into view. Visage horribly contorted by the death that had come upon him, the man was almost past recognition. Cole had seen death in many of its forms on the long cattle trails, and in whisky-fouled barrooms and gold camp brothels, but even so this sight shook him to the core.

Then suddenly as he stared fascinated at the dead man, recognition flooded through him. It had been eight years since he had left the Buckhorn, and faces grow dim in that length of time. But now he remembered that contorted, purple face.

The dead man was old Hank Sanders, *segundo* of the Circle C—Sam Carson's foreman. It was little wonder that Beth had nearly fainted. The marvel was that she hadn't slipped from her saddle, and been trampled by her dun mount. Anger began to kindle in Flint's heart, and then the dead man's forehead was struck by a clear bar of moonlight. Black and ugly against the purple hue of the skin, he saw the crude mark of a contorted hand burned into the flesh!

"It is the brand of death!" Cole heard Beth Carson whisper.

SHE had stood more than any woman was meant to stand. Cole hit the trail and caught her in his arms as she sagged from the saddle. He carried the unconscious girl past the granite outthrust a

little way ahead and laid her carefully into needles a gnarled pine had dropped from above. Carrying her he had been poignantly aware of the soft, womanly curves of her body against him. Now brushing back the auburn-red hair from her oval face, a wave of tenderness swept through him, and mixed with it Cole felt the anger in him start to burn brighter. He had come back to Buckhorn to take up at last where his parents had left off. His father had been a pioneer here, a man proud of the civilization growing up in these wilds. Hardy men and women had come here, braving hardships, to carve a niche for themselves out of Montana's frontier. Peace and friendliness had been the rule here—a man had enough to fight without battling his neighbor.

But this indeed was a new order! What manner of madman, Cole asked himself, was in the saddle now? Who could murder as he had murdered, and then with the callous cruelty of a fiend, brand his victim with a mark he'd carry to the grave. An eerie feeling of dread stole through Cole. Now he could understand Bachelor's looking across his shoulder before warning him away from Buckhorn. He could almost feel the malignant presence of the man who had murdered old Hank Sanders.

And as though his thoughts had communicated themselves to the girl, he felt her stir. Her eyes were open when he looked down at her, and all he read in them at first glance was fear and dread. She pushed up from the hips, staring wildly about. Cole knew that she felt the same eerie dread that had come over him.

Her fingers reached out and caught at his rock-hard arm as he knelt beside her. Cole had been a tall string-bean of a youngster when he had left Buckhorn, and the years had added height and breadth to his body. The life he had lived had put strength of character into his high-boned face, and wide, flat lips.

His gray-blue eyes were steady as a gun-barrel. Success, and the sureness of his gunhand, had marked him with a powerful dye. Men turned to him instinctively as a leader.

And that was what Beth Carson did now. She seemed to have forgotten her hot flare of anger at sight of him with Bachelor. He was like a piece of driftwood now to a shipwrecked sailor, a rock to shelter her in a storm. But that seemed to be all. Bitterness stung Cole as he realized this, and then he caught himself guiltily. What right had a man to be thinking such thoughts, when murder was loose in Buckhorn, when gun-guards ordered people from the trails so the fiendish chief of them all could commit his crimes without chance of discovery?

"Beth," he said with the bluntness that was characteristic of him, "tell me what's been going on in this country. Have things like tonight happened before? And why, if it's any of my business, would anyone want to murder old Hank?"

"Hank," Beth Carson said in a dull, lifeless voice, "was carrying twenty thousand dollars from the sale of our last herd to Buckhorn to pay off our notes at the bank. It won't be in his belt now."

Cole pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. Twenty thousand dollars! Robbery then, had been the motive for this murder. A frown creased his brow. "How would this killer know that he was carrying money, Beth?" Cole Flint asked gently. "Surely you don't advertise a thing like that. And why in the name of Tophet would he be carryin' it in at night, 'stead of during regular bankin' hours?"

The girl slipped back to one elbow, supporting her chin against her hand as she faced him. "It's the way we have to do things around here now," she said in the same dull tone. "The Hand knows everything. We thought if Hank slipped in tonight with the money, nobody would suspect him. That's why I went to town

today to make arrangements with Mr. Thompson of the Cattleman's Bank to accept the money at his home. But it didn't do any good. Nothing ever does. Cole, you ask how long this has been going on. Measuring by days and months not long, but measuring by the fear and terror that's haunting everybody it seems like years. There are only about half of the families you know left in *Valle del Oro* now. Fear has driven the others away. They've mortgaged their places for what they could and left them for the bank to take over. That clutching hand you saw branded on Hank's forehead seems like a horrible shadow suspended above Buckhorn. Men can't stand the suspense of where or who it will strike next."

There was a dry honesty in the girl's voice now, that made Cole believe every word of the fantastic tale she was telling. Carefully he listened as she added further facts.

"Wells-Fargo has lost so many Express boxes, that they've threatened to cancel their Buckhorn run. Mines in the Moguls hoard their gold now, Cole, under twenty-four hour guard rather than trust it to the stages, or to their own wagons. No caution seems to be enough. The Hand seems to sense money—"

"But hasn't anyone seen this phantom?" Cole broke in. "Good God, Beth, a thing like this can't be happening here. What about this gun-hawk, King Baron? I was telling you the truth when I said I'd never heard of the man before."

Beth Carson nodded. "I know, Cole, but the shock of seeing you with Tom Bachelor was just too much when you couple it with fear. I knew when he warned me off the trail that something was going to happen. That's the way The Hand works. Baron is his lieutenant, and takes his orders, and men like Bachelor take Baron's orders. And yet even Baron himself doesn't seem to know who The Hand is."

"It's incredible," Cole Flint spoke the words as much to himself as to the girl.

"It may sound incredible to you," Beth Carson said with a touch of her former vigor, "but this murder and robbery means the end of the Circle C. The bank is giving no extensions these days. They don't dare with things like they are now."

So much had happened that Cole had had no chance to mention old Sam Carson. "Your father—?" he began.

"We laid him to rest beside mother almost a year ago," Beth Carson said simply. "Since then I've been running the Circle C—and, and the old F-Bar. Now, they'll both go."

She had cared for his old ranch, and that was better than words to prove that she had expected him to return someday. Hope stirred again in Cole's heart, but he forced it back grimly. He could not ask Beth the questions hammering at him until the shadow of this horrible curse that had fallen over Buckhorn was removed.

Mind made up, Cole straightened to his feet. "Beth," he told her gently, "don't you worry about the Circle C or the F-Bar. I've come back here with a full poke—enough to cover your notes at the bank. I'm going to get your horse for you now, and you're going to ride home and tell the hands to come and get Hank."

"But you—?"

"I'm ridin' into Buckhorn," Cole told her gravely. "Sometimes people can't see the things that are right under their noses. I've been gone a long time and mebbe a pair of fresh eyes will see what the rest of you've missed!"

Naked fear for him clouded Beth Carson's eyes as she scrambled to her feet. "Cole, don't," she said fiercely. "Don't! Let the Circle C go. Let the F-Bar go. I want to ride out of this country with you and never come back. Take me away from here!"

The man who had been gone so long shook his dark head. "Beth," Cole told

her gently, "men that dodge their troubles instead of whipping them don't get very far."

"If you go to Buckhorn you'll die like Hank," she whispered. "Nobody can whip The Hand."

One of Cole Flint's rare smiles broke the smooth line of his lips. "Mebbe not, Beth, but I sure as hell am goin' to try!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Hand Strikes

COLE FLINT reached Buckhorn as the full moon approached the zenith. He had cut Hank Sanders down from the lightning-riven pine, and laid his body beside the trail, to await the coming of the Circle C riders. With nausea crawling through him he had forced himself to examine that mark on the old *segundo's* forehead. The clutching hand brand, he decided, had been burned on with a small running iron dipped in some kind of acid, for there was no sign of fire nearby that might have warmed the iron.

The whole situation was mystifying, and naturally there were things the terrified girl hadn't told him.

Things, Cole told himself, that Sheriff Mason, who had been in office when he had left here as a youngster, might be able to tell him. Why, he wondered, hadn't the sheriff jailed King Baron, Tom Bachelor or any other of Baron's gunslicks.

Those questions were driven from his mind as he hit the head of Flint Street, which had been named after his father, a founder of Buckhorn. Everything was much as he remembered it, the falsefront stores and saloons, the brick bank and stage station, and farther on, the solidly built courthouse. Only the faces he saw on the street were different, and now all of them were running along the boardwalk in one direction, toward the Wells-Fargo office.

The dust of Flint Street refracted the strong light of the moon and Cole, riding Eureka down the middle of the thoroughfare, could see the stage above the heads of the crowd. By that strange telepathy that spreads the word of disaster he saw that every man still awake in Buckhorn seemed to know what had happened.

Cole heard shouts on all sides. "Stage robbed again! Guard shot! The driver, Henry Worsham's, in bad shape!"

And indeed he appeared to be. Cole could see him on his high box through the swirling kicked up by his four-horse hitch. Worsham was swaying in his seat like a drunk, hand clutched to one side. His guard was slumped down against the footrest beside him.

Cold anger made Flint spur through the milling crowd gathered about the old Concord. People were so damned busy talking that no one seemed to think of helping the driver from his perch. Cole pushed up alongside, as the crowd fell back from the palomino. Harsh-voiced, he snapped orders at the townsmen.

"Somebody get into the General Store there," he ordered. "Make a light and lay out a blanket on the floor. Another of yuh get a fire goin' and boil water. One of yuh run for the sawbones. And the rest of yuh clear out of the way. Do you want this man to die while you stand around and gape at him?"

COLE swung down, ground-hitching the palomino, knowing the big animal would stand obediently until he returned. He clambered onto the wheel, subconsciously aware that the crowd had fallen silent, save for an ugly murmur here and there.

"Who the hell's that gent?" he heard someone grumble. "What right's he got tuh rawhide everybody in sight. Dang him—"

Men hated to hear the truth, and they hated anyone who took hold and managed things they couldn't handle themselves.

He had made himself no friends by this quick action, but at the moment Cole didn't care. As he saw it, here was Buckhorn's first break. Worsham couldn't very well have been robbed without seeing his assailant. According to Beth's story, this was the first man to lose his load to The Hand, and live to tell about it—if he would tell.

Urgency moved Cole's speedy, controlled muscles. The driver was a ribbon-popper of the old school, he saw at a glance. Frayed buckskins covered him. But his face, usually the hue of saddle-leather, looked like yellow parchment now. The whole middle of his body was dark with spilled blood. He was going fast, the life draining from him like water from a leaky tank.

The old fellow had noticed his distinctive palomino, and though it must have cost a tremendous effort, he managed a faint grin at Cole. "Yuh must be Flint," he managed to say in a gaspy tone. "Heerd about that fancy nag of yores back at the last stop. Sorry to tell yuh, fella, but I lost a strong box addressed to you. The Hand got it—"

Cole caught the old-timer as he toppled forward on his seat. He felt the first laxness of death sweep over Worsham, as dragging despair hit him with numbing impact. This stage had been carrying most of the gold he had amassed in San Francisco. A thousand, or a bit less, was in the money-belt beneath his shirt. It wouldn't go far toward clearing the debt of the Circle C and the F-Bar!

One raid had wiped eight year's proceeds from the books of his life. But it was not of himself that he was thinking now. His thoughts were for a red-haired girl who was going to lose everything unless this wanton killer who called himself The Hand was brought to heel, and his stolen hoard discovered.

Then things started happening too fast for further thought.

White-haired, stocky Sheriff Jeff Mason had come up from the courthouse on the run. He was at the off front wheel now, eyes widening as he recognized the tall, quietly-garbed stranger holding the dead driver in his arms.

"Cole Flint," he gasped in astonishment. "Whenever in hell did you get back to Buckhorn?"

"Tonight," Cole snapped, "and so far it's been one damned funny homecoming. Tom Bachelor, gun-guardin' the *del Oro* trail. Old Hank Sanders hung by the neck to a dead pine, his forehead branded, his money-belt with twenty thousand Circle C iron men in it gone. And now this. Not tuh mention that the road agent pullin' the trick got close to fifty thousand in cash and bonds I was shippin' in for deposit here."

Most of the crowd had stepped back to the boardwalks, which put them beyond range of Cole's low-voiced words to the sheriff.

Jeff Mason stepped onto the hub to help Cole hand down the dead men. His face, Cole saw, was almost as gray as those of the ribbon-popper and guard.

"Cole," he muttered, "danged if I know what to say about yore loss, fella."

"We'll talk later, amigo," Flint softened his tone. "Hell, Jeff, I ain't blamin' you for loss of my *dinero*. But I sure as the devil am goin' to make Buckhorn a mighty hot town until I get it back! Let's get this chore done and have some private talk. Sometimes two heads are wuth more'n one."

A grateful light shone suddenly in the sheriff's eyes. "Cole, The Hand's got everybody in Buckhorn and *del Oro* valley scared gutless. It'll mean a lot to me if you'll stand by."

Cole nodded but before he could speak, a gnarled bent figure of a man in cast-off clothes, and over-size shoes shuffled alongside the wheel. A tangled mop of gray hair clung damply to his forehead. A

colorless stubble of beard covered his narrow face. He looked like an animated scarecrow, and his voice sounded like a gate that needed grease.

"Let me help yuh, sheriff," he piped. "Ol' Droopy's helped pack more dead men than he is years old, so I guess carryin' a couple more won't hurt me any."

THE bent old jasper had come from the Eagle Saloon, next door to the stage station. Cole had seen him appear. Evidently the old codger was a swamper in there. Cole had seen his kind in many a trail-town, poor devils the range had no use for, eking out a slender existence sweeping out barrooms and cleaning dirty spittoons. If helping carry a couple of dead men down the street to the undertaker's would give him a feeling of importance let him have it.

With the aid of the stove-up old timer, Cole carried the dead ribbon-popper, while Sheriff Mason and the Wells-Fargo agent, John Clark, carried the guard. They were followed by the morbidly curious crowd, save for a half-dozen silent men who stepped cat-like onto the porch of the Eagle to watch the procession pass.

A hanging lantern above the saloon door gave Cole enough light to study the sextette as he moved past. A single, slanting glance was enough to tell him this was King Baron's bunch. The stamp of gunhawk was on each of the group. One appraising look was enough to tab five of them. The sixth man merited closer scrutiny for, Cole realized, he was seeing King Baron for the first time.

The gun-boss was big, wearing his black clothes with a touch of elegance. Twin Colts rode his stocky thighs. There was a certain feline arrogance about him that made the short hairs at the back of Cole Flint's neck lift in instinctive antagonism.

Then they were past the Eagle, and a few minutes later their grim burdens were laid to temporary rest in the gloomy back-

room of the undertaking establishment.

"Only one makin' any money around this town is the undertaker!" the old swamper who called himself Droopy, cackled.

"That joke's in damned bad taste, fella," the sheriff cracked. "Now I ain't wantin' to rush you off or anything like that, but me'n Cole, and Clark here have got smoke talk tuh made, and so—"

"I can take a hint," Droopy piped. "Thanks for lettin' me help you gents out." He went through the door with the scuttling gait of a crab, and Cole's nose wrinkled with disgust. There was no particular reason for it, but he had taken an instinctive dislike to the harmless old swamper.

But any further thought he might have wasted on the decrepit oldster was jarred from his mind by the Wells-Fargo agent's sharp voice. "Mason," he said bitingly, "you and this man who seems to be a newcomer may have talk to make, but what I have to say is short and sweet. Our business has gone to pot here. If one more Buckhorn stage loses its payload and driver, I will close our office. If you want Wells-Fargo to help keep this town on the map, get busy and do something. Good evening to you!"

COLE looked at the lawman who had been young with his own father. Eight years had added weight to Jeff Mason's waistline, loosened the flesh of his face, but his eyes were still clear and alert, and the agent's words had squared his shoulders stubbornly.

"Clark was a little rough," he muttered belligerently. A step carried him toward the door as though he would follow the man.

Cole stopped him with hard fingers on his shoulder. "Jeff," he said through tight lips, "you can't blame Clark. Mebbe you think it feels good to lose the gold you've dreamt of spending in *del Oro*."

His words seemed to take the starch from the old sheriff. Cole saw his stubborn shoulders sag. A look of defeat crossed his face. "Cole," he said, "I hear you, and I heard Clark, and I've heard most everybody else in Buckhorn and *del Oro*. Every danged pusson has got a different idee of how to flush this Hand jasper. None of 'em has been worth a damn. Each time a stage is held up, it's done single-handed. Same for murders, like Hank. Tracks allus lead back to Buckhorn. It's danged hard, Cole, for dead men tuh tell yuh who robbed 'em, and bein's as this hombre is a lone wolf that makes it even tougher."

Anger was beginning to run like a strong flood through Cole Flint. Anger that instead of clouding his brain seemed to purify it with a crystal light. "He's not a lone wolf," he said vibrantly. "Bachelor, and those gunnies of Baron's crew watchin' us from the Eagle, are in his pay. They know when something is comin' off. They keep all approaches this Hand might use guarded. If you call that bein' a lone wolf yo're a lot dumber than I figure you, Jeff."

"Baron swears he's never seen the jasper," Mason said dully, "and danged if I don't believe him. Warnin' a man off a trail ain't no offense, Cole."

"Mebbe not, but a warrant for assault and battery would jug Baron sudden, wouldn't it?"

"Baron's mighty careful, Cole," the sheriff shook his head. "It's sartin shore that he gits his orders somehow, and passes 'em on tuh his bunch. But you cain't jug a man on assault charges when he don't assault nobody. Furthermore folks steer clear of him. Most everybody figures they'd about as leave tangle with a buzz-saw."

Cole gave the lawman a hard grin. "I've rid out a few tough ones in my time. You walk into the Eagle in about ten minutes with yore gun in your fist. Baron is goin'

to be charged with assault and battery! With him outa your way, the Hand is goin' to have to go it alone. He ain't goin' to trust any of Baron's crew, and mebbe when he does have tuh work alone some-thin' will slip."

He walked out before the sheriff could protest, and with his shoulders squared moved down the nearly empty boardwalk. Cole savored the night air, and hard exhilaration carried him forward. And yet, oddly enough, that eerie feeling came back to him, as though even now The Hand knew the plan they'd talked over.

The thought was verified almost instantly when he brushed through the batwings of the Eagle. The years had taught him to sense danger, had taught him the value of seeing and remembering things at a glance. And a glance was all he had.

King Baron was standing, spread-legged, facing him. As Cole entered, Baron had thrust a scrap of paper out of sight. The gunnies who had been with him on the porch were scattered about the room. Six or seven "patrons" were strung out in front of the bar. The room was lighted by three reflector lanterns hung from the ridgepole. Baron's hands were petting his gun-butts.

A lot of things seemed to happen all at once then, and Cole was almost ready to swear that the first happening at least was as much a surprise to Baron as himself.

Glass crashed from one of the dirty windows in the opposite wall. Cole glimpsed a hand clutching a Colt, and instinctively threw himself sidewise as the weapon blared. But the lead was not intended for his body. One of the hanging lights snuffed out. Fantastically accurate, slugs from the weapon in that gnarled hand at the window had neatly clipped the lantern wick. The bar fell into shadow, and then darkness settled over the whole saloon; four shots blending into a steady roar, the window gunner doused light from the remaining lanterns.

A patron at the bar squawked like a frightened rooster, and Cole heard the scuffle of his boots as he dove for the cover of a table. Snaky tongues of flame lanced out about the room. Lead sucked past his face so close he could feel the breeze. Slugs sang behind him now, for he was already plunging toward the corner where he had placed Baron. Shouts added their noise to the Colt music in the dark room. Fantastic as it seemed The Hand had known he would come here, had got his orders to Baron to cut him down. The charge now, Cole thought grimly, would be attempted murder if he could snake the gun-boss out of the room before lead spilled him all over the place.

He had his Colt in his hand, but made no attempt to answer the slugs that were searching him out. The darkness of the Eagle, Cole realized bleakly, was aiding him more than Baron's gunnies. Then the blacker shadow of the gun-boss loomed before him.

A startled curse rose in his throat, as he sensed Cole's presence in the same instant. Flame seared from his hand, and Cole felt the hot scrape of the bullet across his upper arm. He struck out viciously at the mark of flame with the barrel of his own gun, felt the steel smash bone, heard it snap. A yell of agony started from King Baron's lips. Cole swung his left, and all the power of his big shoulders was behind the punch. Fierce elation whipped through him as he felt his knuckles grind into the flesh of Baron's jaw. The gun-boss of Buckhorn was out on his feet. His knees buckled and he started to sag forward. Cole spun and caught him across one shoulder. The man was dead weight but Cole managed to straighten partially. Panting a little, he started for the door.

A voice yelled out of the dark room. "Over by the bar, he's draggin' around. He's hit!"

Cole's harsh voice answered the unseen gunnie. "Your boss is the only one hit.

I'm takin' him out of here like a sack of oats. Spend any more lead and you'll hit the wrong man. Try to cut me off at the door, and I'll use your boss for a shield!"

The threat got him outside. He found the sheriff coming at a puffing run down the boardwalk. "Grab this gent's heels," Cole snapped, "and we'll get him juggled. Unless he's dropped it, he's got a note with The Hand's orders on it to kill me. They had me framed before I walked in. Tell me The Hand works alone!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Buckhorn's Graveyard Showdown

BUT that was exactly what King Baron told them. Wearily, an hour later, Cole stepped from the jail. They had doused Baron with water and brought him to, and Cole had shown him the complaint he'd signed, charging the gun-boss with attempted murder.

"There's no bail for this, mister," he had told Baron. "You'll stay here until you rot, if we file this. But you talk straight and fast and mebbe I won't press the charges."

Baron had talked after that, Cole recalled, as he slogged tiredly along the walk toward the Rocky Mountain House, Buckhorn's only hotel. He had even been eager about it, for sight of that gnarled hand at the rear window had shaken his

nerve too. Baron had convinced him, Cole had to admit, as he reached the hotel and signed the register a sleepy clerk opened for him, that he didn't know a whole lot more about The Hand than they did themselves.

Baron, Cole reflected as he pulled off his boots in an upstairs room, claimed that he found his written orders in many odd places. Sometimes tucked in a boot when he awoke in the morning; sometimes in an empty wash basin. The order to gun down the prodigal had skidded beneath the batwings and almost to his feet, only a few minutes before Cole had put in an appearance. Baron had admitted that he usually found pay—good pay—with each message. Pay, he had admitted also, for doing practically nothing.

"And I ain't lyin' when I tell yuh I don't like the jobs he hands me," Baron had told them earnestly. "I live by my guns and I don't make no bones about it. And that's what I don't like. I hate this Hand's pussy-footin', but dang it gents, I ain't lyin' when I say I'm a-skeered to pull out!"

One fading thought came into Cole's mind as he dropped off to sleep. A chore he had forgotten. He had promised Beth Carson to ride out to the cemetery attendant's house, and ask him to open a grave in the Carson family plot for their old *segundo*, Hank Sanders. Morning, though, would be soon enough to perform that unpleasant task.



Cole rode Eureka east from town soon after an early breakfast. Morning dew still brightened the ground, for the sun had not yet climbed high enough above the Moguls to dry the moisture. The tang of the high Montana air was like wine. Birds sang in the clusters of jackpines that covered the round hill where Buckhorn pioneers lay in eternal sleep. This had always been a peaceful land, Cole reflected, and he vowed grimly that it would be again. But time was important if the Circle C was to be saved. He told himself that he would call on the town bank officials himself when he finished this chore, and plead with them for a short extension on Circle C notes.

Drawing up before the caretaker's small shack at the top of the knoll, Cole wafted a hail toward the closed door. It was a little surprising that old Pop Wells, as everybody called the ancient caretaker, wasn't about. The old-timer, Cole remembered, was usually an early riser. Then his questing eye noted that the chimney above the kitchen was empty of smoke.

A premonitory fear struck through Cole as he dismounted and hammered on the closed door. When no answer came he tried the knob. The door was locked, which was odd. Moving fast, Cole stepped to a small front window cupping his hands about his eyes so that he could see into the dark interior of the little two-room shanty.

After a moment he made out Wells' cot across the room. Pop was there and he was sleeping the sleep from which there is no waking. Wells was dead and Cole, straining his eyes, made out the mark of that weird brand on his forehead.

COLE hit a fast gallop back to Buckhorn. His face was a carved granite mask as he rode into the head of Flint Street. The killing of old Pop Wells had

been wanton murder, and yet by dying Pop might bring peace once more to Buckhorn. Cole's keen mind was busy as he loped along Flint Street.

Ahead of him he saw a knot of bare-headed riders clustered about a buckboard which bore a grim, blanket-draped box. Red gold in the morning sunlight, he caught a glimpse of Beth Carson's bent head. She was talking with Sheriff Mason. The Circle C had arrived with all that was left of Hank Sanders. He too, Cole knew grimly, might rest easier in his grave if he could read the mind of the returned prodigal. For what had started as a hunch was crystallizing now into certainty.

In the sheriff's office an hour later, Cole told a girl whose eyes were red-rimmed with grief, and a grizzled old law-dog the thoughts that had come into his mind since finding the disfigured caretaker.

"Yuh tell me, Jeff, that you can't understand why Wells was murdered. Mebbe I can't answer it either, but here's some ideas I got. The Hand lives right here in Buckhorn amongst us. Mebbyso, yuh talk to him everyday. He's a gent nobody would suspect. He's got a job like you or anybody else—the kind of job where he gets to hear lots of free talk. And where do men talk the easiest? In barrooms, after they get a few slugs of rotgut under their belts. That's how he gets to know so much about what's goin' on. He was at the Eagle last night. I saw his hand with a gun in it, and I saw the best exhibition of shootin' anybody's likely to see for many a moon."

"But what's all this got to do with the death of poor Pop?" Beth Carson broke in.

Cole gave her a grim smile. "I'm comin' to that, Beth. We started things goin' wrong for The Hand when we jailed King Baron last night. He's lost his contact man now. They's just two things he can do—get another one, or pull his

freight. Pop's killin' makes me think he's preparin' to fade. He collected seventy thousand cash in two hauls last night. Rich pickin's. With what else he has picked up, it'll do him the rest of his life. Mebbyso, if he likes this country he can come back like I've returned after a few years, and buy in here as a rancher."

"Then he'll never be made to pay for his crimes!" Heat was in the girl's voice, in her suddenly flashing eyes. "Is this your idea of a battle won, Cole?"

"Not so you'd notice," Cole told her flatly. "Did I say he was goin' to get away?"

"No—"

"Therr get a good grip on yourselves, you two," Cole told them dryly, "because you're goin' to help me nail this jasper. Old Hank Sanders won't mind waitin' until tomorrow to fill the grave one of yore riders is out diggin' for him now."

"I—I don't understand you, Cole?" Perplexity furrowed Beth Carson's brow.

"We're havin' a funeral this afternoon, but I'm goin' to be in the casket instead of Hank!" Cole told them softly. "You're goin' to ask for a private funeral with nobody followin' the hearse and preacher but you and Jeff here."

Cole saw the girl's face pale. Her round bosom heaved suddenly with pent-up breath. "Cole in God's name why should we go through with a farce like this. It—it's horrible!"

Cole Flint answered her, a hard, flat vibrancy in his tones. "Not so horrible as the murders that have been done. Way I figure it, The Hand has hidden his gold in some old grave not far from where Wells' shack stands. To have time to get at it, and make ready for his getaway, he had to be rid of Pop. I'll stake my life that he'll be out there tonight to get his stuff, and I want to be on hand to meet him. Only way to get there without anybody knowin' it is in a casket!"

"You're takin' a chance," Jeff Mason warned somberly, "of bein' measured for one permanent. But if I wasn't too danged fat to fit Hank's coffin I'd fight it out with yuh for the same privilege. Good luck, son!"

THE funeral was at dusk and Buckhorn folk lined the boardwalks to watch the short procession pass. Wedges, barely visible kept the coffin lid ajar so that air, and some sound came to the "dead man." Cole could hear the crowd murmur, and he knew grimly that if this ruse of his failed he'd lose another friend. Citizens were beginning to demand action—to demand a new sheriff.

The jolting ride seemed as though it would never end, but finally Cole felt himself being lowered into the ground. He could hear the scrape of the coffin against the sides of the grave, and then the drone of the parson's voice, for even he had not been taken into their confidence. The solemnity of it brought a dew of cold sweat to his brow. Of all the things he had ever seen or done, this was the most unusual. But the gamble was worth it, for before going to the undertaking parlor Beth Carson had admitted her love for him. He could still feel the warmth of her lips against his. That hope for the future buoyed him. This was one grave, Cole vowed, that would not mean the end of life!

Curbing his impatience as best he could, he struck a match occasionally to look at the hands of his pocket watch. Time crawled. His cramped position was sending waves of pain through his muscles. If he had to use his gun-hand at this moment, Cole knew grimly that he couldn't do it.

Full dark came outside, and he pressed back the lid of the coffin cautiously. Climbing stiffly to his fet, Cole peered over the edge of the open grave. It gave him an eerie feeling to see the tip of the moon

casting its first rays over the graveyard.

Blood began to circulate through cramped muscles again as he stood there, casting his gaze about the top of the knoll where the dead lay sleeping.

Cole stiffened at the slow strike of a horse's hoofs off to the right. Eyes at ground-level, Cole looked that way. Every nerve in his long body was jumping with excitement. It appeared his hunch was going to turn out to be a good one. For he had known that if the mysterious killer was coming here tonight he would do it before full moon-rise.

Then he saw a horse and rider, with a pack-mule trailing behind on a hackamore, come into view past a corner of the caretaker's cabin. Dimmed by the shimmering, ethereal moon-glow, he could not identify the rider. Slowly, Cole drew the blue Colt at his hip. He had the strong impulse to shoot the rider down mercilessly, as that killer had murdered others in cold blood, but he held himself in check. Death would not solve the problems of the Circle C, or of the others who had lost gold to the lone-wolf raider. That hoard of his had to be discovered. There was fifty thousand cold dollars in it too, that belonged to Cole Flint.

Cole let the man come on. A wide, high-crowned Stetson masked his head. Cole could see the sheen of cartridges in the filled belts at the hombre's waist. And then the rider was dismounting at a small crypt built of ghostly white marble. Cole heard the rattle of a key. The crypt's solid iron door swung open. The man disappeared inside.

Springs seemed to move the returned prodigal. Cole was hardly conscious of climbing from the open grave. All his attention was focussed on that white crypt: All the hatred of the sadistic killer who branded his dead came to a sharp focus.

The man was leaving the crypt, a filled saddlebag across one shoulder. Cole

awaited the dim figure. He was the picture of justice standing there, and the skulking, bent thing before him was the personification of evil.

He heard a gasp rip from the throat of the hunched killer as he saw him, and then Cole witnessed again that gun-magic. The other's hands moved, with the speed of a striking diamond back, toward his hips. His guns were clear of leather and spouting as Cole triggered. He felt the slap of a slug through his upper arm, and with a cold wickedness he let the hammer fall again on his piece.

The killer was falling. A facsimile of the gnarled hand he had etched on human flesh reached out to try and clutch again his death-dealing guns, and then Cole saw his fingers relax.

Moving like an automaton, emotion drained from him, Cole stepped to the side of the dead man. He nudged the sombrero from where it had fallen across his face with the toe of his boot, and shock roiled through him. He had not expected to recognize The Hand, but the face was one that he remembered. The man at his feet was the supposedly harmless old swamper, Droopy!

The beat of many hoofs were lifting up the hill from town. The sheriff had been waiting for the gunshots, Cole reasoned. He was still looking down at the dead swamper, wondering what twisted philosophy had prompted him to take up the terror trail when Sheriff Mason, Beth Carson and a half dozen riders swept up and around him.

The girl flung herself from her horse before it stopped moving, caught at Cole with her young arms. She saw the blood mantling one coat sleeve, dripping from his fingers.

"You're hurt—oh Cole!"

Looking down, he gave her one of his rare smiles. "I'd pay a bigger price for you and *del Oro* valley," he said quietly.

THE END

Bullet-Bait Bonanza

By Art Lawson

The stake was an old man's life, a girl's love and a fortune in yellow nuggets The Red Bluff stranger, like David of Bible days, tried to win that stake, against a range Goliath's framed game — when his only weapon was a pocketful of pebbles !

THE SHADOWS stretched far ahead of him, and a light shone its friendly greeting from the kitchen window of the Hale place as he rode by. Yet Jack Scott neither hesitated nor hurried. At this particular moment he did not want to see Betty Hale or to let her know he was in the neighborhood—and

if it were dark when he hit town it would just help that much more to carry out the chore he had picked for himself.

"Take it easy, Booger," he said to his long-legged mount who, with prospects of oats and a warm stall, had broken into a trot. "Slow down! That's the boy."

"Not that slow," he added as Booger



He ran for the cover of the grove, throwing a hurried shot.

snuffed, moved ahead cautiously, testing his master to see when he could trot again, and Jack pondered the chances of success on the job ahead of him. Not that he had any chance but to go ahead—his old friend, Pete Hale, was locked up, waiting a date with the gallows and, according to the stories Jack had heard down the trail nothing short of a miracle could save him from the hangman's hemp.

So Jack loafed along, planning that miracle, until they topped a rise looking down on the lights of Red Bluff and the river twisting beyond it.

Like the Hale place, he thought, a little more seedy but otherwise the same as it had been seven years ago when he rode away to see what was on the other side of the mountains. Like himself—just the same but older—and maybe a little wiser.

He rode on through the town. The kid at the Mustang Corral did not recognize him. He got by old Ma in the Beanery by pulling his hat down over his eyes and smoking a cigarette when he gave his order and paid the bill. He faced Gus in the Broken Bottle saloon and was not immediately identified, simply because the Gus he had known had gone on to his reward and the new Gus was a complete stranger.

"I've found gold," Jack told him. "Tons of it! Layin' on the ground like sheepherders on payday. Gimme the biggest bottle in the house. This is my night to howl!"

The bald-headed bartender gaped, fished under the bar, brought out an imperial quart of Canada's Best, planked it on the cherrywood in front of Jack Scott and set a glass beside it.

"That'll be just one double eagle," he said, "or the same in dust."

Jack poured the drink before he answered, thrust his hands deep into his pockets and rattled the two big fistfuls of pebbles he had there.

"Just don't worry about it. Don't worry a bit. And if you've got another glass in the joint, bring it over. I'm powerful lonesome for a drinkin' pardner right now!"

The bartender put out a second glass, poured a short drink.

Jack withdrew a nugget from his pocket and dropped it on the bar. It was the only nugget he had ever owned. For seven years now he had carried it in a little doeskin bag slung by a thong around his neck. It had been given him by a lady of fifteen who had made him promise not to spend it foolishly. She had told him that she hoped he would use it to come back home with—or to save him from some great emergency.

He smiled ruefully.

"Plenty more where that come from," he said to the bartender.

The girl had also said, "I'll never speak to you again, Jack if you spend that nugget on wild living or in bars."

The barkeep studied the nugget, giving Jack a chance to pour most of his drink into the spittoon. Jack poured himself another substantial snort.

"Cowboy," the 'keep said, "you say they're layin' around ready to be picked?"

"So thick," Jack said, "they'd blind you. I had to pick these up with my eyes closed. In the middle of the night, too. And no stars."

The bartender said, "Well, I better weigh it. You got change coming to you, mister."

He waddled off. When he vanished into a back room Jack got rid of the major part of his second drink. The bartender came back with the scales, weighed the nugget, then got some change. Jack filled his glass for the third time, pushed the bottle over to Gus and said, "Have another, *amigo*."

The bartender had another and Jack reflected that this was the first time in his life he had ever heard of anyone getting

twenty-four dollars for a nugget worth hardly eighteen. He had had that piece of gold weighed before . . .

HE DID not dare dump any more whisky into the cuspidor and there was no other handy place for the disposal of his drinks. The bottle was nearly half empty, however—far enough down for him to begin showing the effects. He leaned on the bar with both elbows, stared gloomily into the mirror.

To the left of him, near the saloon's wall, a group of men were playing cards, making elaborate pretense of not noticing him. Two or three he recognized, not by name, but rather as people he must have known several years ago when he lived here in Red Bluff. A couple were newcomers. Then the batwing doors flapped open and a husky, medium-tall gent wearing a big diamond stickpin, walked in. He smiled on everyone, waved to include the whole barroom, and stepped up to the bar to take his place only a few feet from Jack's left elbow. Jack did not miss the fact that the man's glance briefly passed over his bottle before he made an order.

"Canada's Best, Gus, beer chaser."

Gus looked embarrassed. "Hell, Matt, maybe you'd like something else. I'm fresh out of yore brand."

Matt sucked in his lower lip, pondered. Jack Scott took the cue. Balancing himself uncertainly on his right elbow, he turned to the man with the stickpin and said: "Have a drink on me, mister. Welcome. Got lots of it. Plenty more where it come from."

"Don't mind if I do," the man said.

Gus put out a glass. "Say. You gents ain't met, have you? Matt Borger, this here is, uh . . ."

Jack cut in, "Willis—Willis Watts from points west. An' no cracks at the name, *amigo*. I been fightin' bigger gents all my life over that name."

Matt Borger lifted his glass. "No raw-

hidin' from this quarter, Willis. That was my father's name. Would have been mine, too, only my older brother was born first and took my old man's name along with all his money."

"Damn it, Matt . . ." Jack said, "it's like comin' home, havin' a feller call me Willis without laughin'."

Jack was sure now that Matt Borger, not the scales, was the reason why Gus had gone out to the back room. He purposely spilled his drink and let his knees sag. He would have fallen over if Matt had not come to his rescue and held him up—while, incidentally, rubbing against the pocket of pebbles.

According to the stories down the trail, this was the place in which old Pete Hale had gotten into trouble. He had come in here with gold in his pants—had gotten drunk—and had shot a man. Now Pete was due for a hanging. And Jack figured that if he could follow closely enough in Pete's footsteps, he could save the old timer—and himself—from that last jump.

It looked to him now as if the bartender and Borger were about ready to take him over.

"Hell," Jack said, "guess I had too much. Been on the wagon so long, guess I can't take it. They don't have whisky up at . . . well . . . uh . . . where I been."

He smiled at Gus and the bartender got the inference. "He's been travellin' in the back country," he explained to Borger.

"That's it," Jack nodded. "Got to be goin' to bed now."

Gus broke in suddenly, "Say, Matt, what happened to yore charm?"

Borger glanced down at his stomach. An elk tooth hung from the right loop of the heavy gold chain slung across his checkered vest, but the left loop held only a small ring and swivel from which something had been broken.

"Must have fallen off," Borger said sadly. "Just discovered it tonight. You

know, Gus, I feel kinda naked without that."

"Had a nugget on it," Gus informed Jack. "Bigger than the one you brung in."

"Did you have a nugget?" Matt Borger asked Jack.

"Sure!" Jack was expansive again. "Dozens. Be seein' yuh, boys . . ."

Matt stopped him. "I just don't feel right without a nugget hanging from my watchchain. How about selling me one."

"Sure," Jack said. "You just wait here an' I'll get you one the size of a duck egg."

"I'd sure appreciate that," Borger said.

JACK WOVE out of the barroom. At the walk, Borger caught up with him. "You look kinda sick," he explained. "Gus told me you had both pockets full of nuggets, and I figured it wouldn't do any harm for me to go along with you. Sick and rich at the same time is bad in this town. No telling what would happen."

"Okay," Jack said, "an' thanks."

He took Borger's arm, ambled to the Mustang Corral. There he took his saddlebags from the peg on which they had been hanging and promptly dropped them on the floor. They landed with a dull thud. Borger's eyes batted.

"I shouldn't of drunk so much," Jack said. "Let's take this up to the hotel. You can have yore pick."

He and Borger each took a grip on the strap connecting the bags. Jack let Borger carry most of the weight as they stumbled back toward the Busted Bottle saloon. Jack's spine was beginning to tingle. The acetylene flare before the saloon had blown out despite the fact that there was no wind. It wouldn't be long now, he thought, before something happened.

"This isn't all gold, is it?" Borger asked.

Jack shook his head. "Got a shirt and

an extry pair pants in there. The pants got copper rivits. Weigh somethin' awful."

They had passed the Beanery. Beyond that was the barber shop, then an alley, then the general store. As they reached the alley, Jack's toe caught on a loose board and he went to his knees dragging Borger after him. He rolled over to sit on the saddlebags and started yelling.

"Yippee!"

He yanked his gun and fired down the alley at a shadow that he thought was a man. But the light of the burning powder showed him he had made a mistake.

"Yippee!"

Jack shot into the sky, then down the road. Doors banged along the main street of Red Bluff. Men rushed out of the Broken Bottle and the Beanery. The sheriff lumbered toward them. Jack yanked his hat down further over his forehead.

"Down the alley!" Jack yelled.

The sheriff, leading a posse, ran into the darkness. Matt Borger stopped yanking at the saddlebags. He cursed briefly.

"You sure got an awful load on—there wasn't nobody down that alley."

Jack holstered his gun. "This stuff makes me nervous. Let's get going."

He stood up, hoisted the saddlebags. He and Borger were passing the Broken Bottle when the sheriff caught up with them and clamped a hard hand on Jack's shoulder. Jack dragged his gun again. The sheriff knocked it from his fist.

"You're coming with me," he said.

"I'll take care of him," Borger cut in quickly. "An old friend of mine. Just been drinkin' too much. You let me handle him, Happy."

Jack winced. In the darkness he had been unable to get a good look at the lawman but there was no doubt now that it was old Happy Dimmit, whom he had known entirely too well as a youngster.

An old *amigo*," Borger went on. "I won't let him raise any more hell."

"You won't get the chance," the sheriff said shortly. "I'm locking him up for disturbing the peace. There wasn't anybody down that alley."

"Okay," Borger gave in. "It's up to you, sheriff. I'll take care of these bags."

Jack clung to them. The sheriff yanked him along.

"You will like hell," the sheriff said to Borger.

The mob followed them to the jail. Inside, Jack slumped down into a chair with his chin on his chest. The sheriff got behind the desk, opened a blank book he kept for recording the names of prisoners.

"Name?" the sheriff asked.

Jack remained motionless, his eyes closed. The sheriff swore at him. Jack almost slid out of the chair.

"Out!" the sheriff said.

He threw down his pen, dragged Jack along to the cell at the rear of the jail house. Keeping an arm hooked around the saddlebags, Jack made no protest, but was careful to keep his face away from the lawman. The sheriff hoisted him onto the narrow bench that was to be his bed for the night and suddenly cursed as he felt the weight of the bags. Jack covertly watched the sheriff haul the bags over to a spot where a square of light shone on the cell's floor. He opened the flaps, looked inside.

"Loco," the sheriff said disgustedly.

He fastened the flaps, carried the bags back and dropped them beside Jack. The impact on the floor shook the whole building. The sheriff went out, then, slamming the iron gates behind him and angrily turning the big key.

"Pure nuts!" he said.

AFTER a while Jack began to laugh softly to himself. He had a cell mate, a man whose presence he could tell only by an occasional movement and the blot of darker shadow in the farther corner. When Jack laughed the man said, "After

you been in here as long as I have you won't think it's so damn funny."

Jack sat up. "I won't be in here so long. If the sheriff don't let me out in the morning, Matt Borger will bail me out."

"So you're one of them skunks."

"Pete," Jack said, "I never figured you'd call me anything like that."

The other man made no immediate answer. He came closer to Jack, scratched a match and studied him in the flickering glow.

"I'll be damned if it ain't John," he gasped.

"Don't talk so loud," Jack whispered.

Pete Hale was whiter than he had been when Jack last saw him, more gaunt, and this spell in jail had done him no good.

"You've growed a lot," Pete said. "Hang me for a Christmas stocking! What you doing here, boy?"

"Spending the night," Jack said. "Say—" he tried to sound casual—"how's that skinny little daughter of yours?"

"Fattened up some since you last seen her." Old Pete had taken Jack's hand and was shaking it. "Gosh—she'll bust an eyeball tomorrow when she sees you. She's been workin' too hard since I got stuck in here. I'll be damned, Jack! I jest can't get over this." He dropped Jack's hand. "Howcome you knew who I was in the dark— Oh, hell! You must of heard I was in here."

"Been hearin' it all over," Jack said. "Kinda thought I'd like to pay you a good long visit. Raised a ruckus down town and here I am."

Jack's old friend cogitated a moment before he brought up the thought that had been disturbing him. "That skunk, Borger, don't know what you got in your saddlebags, does he? I heard them land. Where'd you find that stuff, Jack?"

"Back the trail a piece." Jack answered the last question first. "Now, listen—my name is Willis Watts. And Matt Borger don't know what I got in those bags."

"Thank God for that," Pete Hale said. "You know, Jack—Willis—that's a hell of a name—I kinda got what was comin' to me, gettin' in here. I been thinking about it. I found a place—" his voice dropped to a whisper—"a pocket, sort of, as lousy with nuggets as a sheepherder's sougans are with nits. Behind Old Woman Mountain. It went to my head and I got drunk. Imagine that, Ja—Willis—with a pocket full of gold I had to get drunk and go boasting to Matt Borger."

"You never did have much good sense," Jack said.

"Nope, I never did. And so I got drunker and told Matt just about where he could find my strike. Up Blood Canyon. Damn it!"

Pete Hale and Jack Scott were sitting on Jack's bench-like bed in a jail cell so dark neither could see the other. But there was something about being with his old friend that was home to Jack.

"I heard tell," Jack said, "that you murdered a gent called Mike Danby—partner of Borger."

"I heard it, too," Pete said dolefully. "And I wish I had—seein' as I'm going to hang for it. In fact—maybe I did kill him. I don't know."

"That beats me," Jack said. "If you're going to murder a gent you might as well know it and get the fun out of it."

Pete Hale said, "I was celebratin', and I can't hold it like I could when I was younger. They were tryin' to find out where I got that gold. Had me in the back room. When I told them it was up the canyon Danby yanked a gun on me and suddenly folded up and died. It scared me so I didn't know if I did it, or Borger. Borger was right behind me. And when the sheriff came, Danby didn't have a gun on him and my hogleg had one fresh-shot cartridge. So what can you do about that?"

"Wasn't there nobody else there?"

"Only Matt Borger and Joe Kisco. Matt says I done it. Says I got mad at Danby and murdered him. Joe beat it. Nobody knows what happened to Joe. Matt says Joe wasn't even there. Everybody knows I was drunk—and nobody believes me."

"It sure is a puzzle," Jack said. "And I'm worn out. I'm going to sleep."

Pete Hale stumbled through the darkness to his own bunk. Jack stretched out to think. If only he could find Joe Kisco, maybe he could save Pete from the gallows. But finding Joe would not be an easy job if Borger had paid him to keep out of sight.

After a while, Pete said, "Don't let Matt find out what you got in them saddlebags or you'll get into the same pickle."

"I won't," Jack said. "Don't worry about that."

WHEN the sheriff let him out in the morning, he took Jack into the office and started out making a record. Jack grinned at him.

"Name—" the sheriff started, glancing up from the book—"Hell—I mighta known! I thought we got rid of you for keeps, long ago. How in hell are you, John?"

The sheriff put out one big hand and Jack shook with him. Suddenly the lawman's eyes narrowed.

"What's the idea of carryin' around all them pieces of melted lead? I couldn't sleep all last night worryin' about it."

"My hoss was too skittery," Jack said, "and I wanted to weigh him down. You don't mind, do you, if I leave them in there with Pete for a spell?"

The sheriff shook his gray head. "It's awful. I don't blame Pete for what he done. But I shore hate to see him hanged for it. Pete and me rode many a trail together, John."

Jack said, "Aw, forget it. I'll be hang-

ing around a couple of days, Happy. Maybe we can bend an elbow, some night. When I was a kid I always wanted to have a drink with the sheriff."

The sheriff laughed at that, shook hands again with Jack, and Jack left. He walked down the main street. At the Beanery he winked at Ma, whispered, "Don't let on who I am."

Ma gulped. Jack sat at a corner table with his back to the door and ordered bacon and eggs and fried potatoes.

"Also half an apple pie and a quart of coffee."

He had nearly finished the meal, and was just starting in on the pie when a chair was pulled out beside him and Matt Borger sat down. Jack grinned. Matt said, "You're looking better. Glad I could help you to a safe place last night."

Jack nodded. It looked as if the fish were taking another nibble at his bait. But the picture had changed some since last night. It would be nice to catch Borger, but right now he had to find Joe Kisco.

Jack said, "I feel terrible, Matt. But it's a good thing I run into you. I sure picked a hell of a time to go wild—uh, with them saddlebags."

Borger smiled crookedly. "I was saying to Gus, last night, I felt better with you in jail. Those saddlebags would have tempted even me if I'd been near them any longer."

He laughed hard, as if it were a big joke and Jack laughed with him. Then Borger became confidential.

"You might have guessed—I'm—uh, interested in mining properties. Came over to talk to you about that strike. If you were thinking of selling a piece . . ."

JACK laughed until the tears came into his eyes. "The joke's on you, Matt. I was just blowin' off last night. As a matter of fact I only had that one little nugget. My pockets were full of pebbles I

picked up. And the bags were full of chunks of lead."

"Sure, of course, I know what you mean," Matt Borger said. "Seeing things in a clearer light this morning, eh?"

"Yeah—sure—anything for a joke."

Matt eyed him suspiciously, then smiled thinly. "I'm really on the level. I've got money to put into a likely mine. You don't need to trust me. We can draw up preliminary papers that will cover you completely—then make a deal after I've looked over the place."

Jack shook his head. "Mister," he said, "I'd sure like to do that—but I can't. I had my fun last night and there's no harm telling you all about it. I won that gold off a feller down the canyon a piece. Got into a poker game with him. A runty, dark-faced gent who said he'd just found a real strike. But he couldn't play poker worth a hang."

Matt Borger studied him closely. Jack saw that he was selling his bill of goods. Borger was crazy for gold. He could be made to believe almost anything if he saw a profit in it.

"Over behind Old Woman Mountain?" he asked.

"Yeah, over that way," Jack said. "Called himself Joe. Maybe he'd sell you a piece."

"Didn't have a last name?"

"None I know of."

Matt Borger pushed back his chair. "Well, I'll be riding over that way. Thanks for the tip, cowboy. If you want to put that, uh, lead in the safe of the Broken Bottle you're welcome to it. Best safe in town."

"That sure is decent of you," Jack said, "but I left it in the jail."

He finished another cup of coffee after Borger left. On the way out he leaned over to chuck old Ma under the chin.

"Purtier than ever," he said.

"You ain't a bit different," said Ma with disgust.

JACK let Borger leave town first. Though Borger started east, Jack saddled up and headed west toward Old Woman Mountain. He rode hard for the spot where Blood Brook cut out of the mountains in a deep, narrow canyon. To do so he had to pass the Hale place, and as he trotted by, hunkered down in the saddle, he saw a tiny figure astride a big horse chousing some steers out of the brush. She was too far away to recognize, but he knew who she was and he cursed to himself that a girl like Betty Hale should have to do such hard work. Very soon, he reflected, if his gamble worked, she would no longer be forced into chores like that.

At Blood Canyon, he turned left, climbed to the rim and dismounted. He tied Booger to a stunted cedar then lay on his stomach watching the back trail. An hour passed before movement below drew his attention. Matt Borger, keeping out of sight of the Hale ranch, was working his way toward the canyon. Jack backed away from the rim and rode swiftly to the first intercepting gulch. There he tied Booger to a tree, slipped down the steep wall and hid behind a jutting rock.

After awhile hoofs sounded in the canyon, then in the gulch. There was silence, then spurs rang on the rock and a man on foot started up the gulch. Jack let Matt Borger pass him. This bit of luck was too good, almost. He had reasoned that Borger would snap at his bait and head for the Old Woman country. He had also figured out that if he didn't keep to the canyon this was the first gulch where he could cut off to bring him to the rear of the mountain. But he was a little surprised that Borger had actually taken it.

So much the better. He made no effort to keep Borger in sight. Rather, he followed along, listening to Borger's spurs so that he would not overtake him. They came to a flat spot where the stream

made a little pool and a waterfall. Here Borger stopped and Jack lay down in the shelter of some thin brush. Borger whistled like a Bob White. Jack waited. Borger worked his way around the pool to a place where the pines grew big. Now and then, at regular intervals, he whistled.

After a while Jack saw him stand up suddenly, facing toward the pines. A second man appeared, stocky and dark, whom Jack recognized as Joe Kisco. Joe had been around Red Bluff when Jack was a kid. Joe gestured with his palms empty and up.

"It ain't here," he said, "he give us a bum steer."

"You know what happened to Mike," Borger said, "when he tried to double-cross me."

Even at that distance, Jack could see Joe tremble. "I been all the way up this brook until there ain't no brook at all!" Joe said. "I found some color. But I didn't find nothing worth diggin' for."

"You found a lot more than color," Borger said.

Joe Kisco shook his head, puzzled. "That old fool, Pete, said it was up this gulch. But I think he lies. I think he told us that just to send us off the trail. I think Pete ain't as drunk as we think he was. He got that gold someplace else."

"Where'd you find the nuggets you lost in that poker game?" Borger asked sharply.

"I don't know about a poker game," Joe said.

From his hiding place, Jack Scott saw Borger's hand moving slowly down toward his holstered six-shooter. He drew his own gun, laid it with the barrel across his forearm, cocked the trigger. Now that he had found Joe Kisco, he was not going to let Borger remove his witness again.

"You haven't already forgotten Mike?" Borger asked.

Joe Kisco's mouth had fallen open. He was never a man to display much guts.

He was backing away, his hands in front of him, open.

"Honest to God!" Joe said. "I don't know. I been looking. I didn't find nothing. Only a little bit color. This ain't the place."

"Then where is it?" Borger asked coldly. "That cowboy had a bag full of nuggets that would break your arm trying to lug it."

Joe only shook his head.

Borger said: "If you can't find it, I can."

His gun started up. And Jack Scott fired . . .

IT WAS only twenty-five yards across the little pool, but the afternoon sun dazzling on it sent up light waves that distorted the picture just enough to cause Jack to miss. His bullet snipped off through the woods. Borger's slug knocked Joe flat on his back. Borger turned briefly to face his new enemy. He ran for the cover of the grove, throwing a hurried shot. Jack triggered a second time, but missed. Then Borger was out of sight.

Jack worked his way around the pool, keeping to the brush until he reached the spot where he would have to cross the stream. There he waited a moment. When nothing happened, he came to his feet to jump the brook and duck hurriedly into the wood. He had expected to draw Borger's fire. Borger, however, had gone.

That was bad news. If Borger had murdered Mike Danby and then shot down Joe Kisco, even the jail would not be a safe enough place for old Pete Hale. And Jack remembered now, that he had told Borger where his saddlebags were.

Joe was still conscious. Borger's bullet had clipped him in the chest. Jack dragged him away from the little pond, ripped off his shirt and bound up his wound. Joe was seriously hurt—but Jack had to keep the little renegade alive until he could get him back to town.

Joe tried to smile his thanks.

"Me—I'm dead," he said. "You ain't Jack Scott—grewed up?"

"Sure I am," Jack said. "I'm hunting the feller who shot Mike Danby. I know damn well that Pete didn't do it. Maybe you know who shot Mike."

"Borger," Joe said. "Pete is too drunk. Celebrating! Borger uses Pete's gun. Danby is going to shoot Pete and Borger so him and me get the strike."

Jack nodded. "I'm taking you to Betty Hale's. She'll fix you up. Give you a drink and get a sawbones. You ready to go."

Joe said, "Yes."

Jack picked him up like a baby. Joe tried to fight down the pain but the jolting movement knocked him out. He was hard to carry that way, limp as a wet rag. But Jack could not leave him behind—and yet he had to hurry.

Borger's horse was gone from the mouth of the gulch. Jack climbed up to where he had tied his own mount. The roan snorted at the smell of blood and Jack had some trouble quieting him. Joe was still unconscious when Jack got into the saddle.

They rode fast, for the sun was setting, and it was dark when they pounded into the yard of the Hale place. The horse slid to a stop by the kitchen. Betty Hale stood in the doorway with a shotgun in her hands.

"Beat it," she ordered.

Jack said, "Hold my horse, Betty. My pal's badly wounded. I got to leave him here."

The girl was stunned. "Jack," she cried, "it can't be!"

"It is," he said. "Hold my horse, kid."

She took the roan's bridle, held him down while Jack slid to the ground, then ran into the house after him. He laid Joe out on the couch in the living room.

"Did a feller come by here a while ago?" Jack asked.

"Riding fast," she said, "toward town." Her wide blue eyes still showed shock at this sudden appearance of Jack Scott. "But, Jack—"

"Swaller it," Jack grinned. "I gotta be going. And for God's sake, don't let Joe die. He can get your old man out of the jug."

He ran out quickly, flung a leg over the saddle, and spurred for Red Bluff.

BETTY HALE was much more lovely than Jack had expected her to be, yet she still retained some of that piquant quality that he remembered from years ago. She had grown up. But of course she would in seven years—and she had met tragedy at first hand. Well, when this night was over, her troubles would be gone with it.

He pulled up at the jail about eight-thirty. The sheriff's horse was at the rack. Jack stepped right out of the saddle into the door.

"Back for that bag of lead?" the sheriff was grinning. Then he jumped to his feet and asked, "Where'd you get that blood on you?"

"From Joe Kisco's heart. Joe says Borger shot Danby. Borger shot Joe this afternoon and headed this way. We gotta get Borger, Sheriff."

"Now, listen here—"

"You come with me"

Jack took the sheriff's arm, yanked him out of there. On the way to the Broken Bottle he explained quickly what he had been doing and what he had seen. At the saloon they stepped in side by side, their hands near guns. Only Gus was there with a handful of barflies.

"Where's Borger?" the sheriff roared.

Gus shook his head. "He's gone loco. Sold me this joint ten minutes ago and went away. I don't know where he went."

"He's in the back room," Jack said.

While the sheriff held Gus under his

gun, Jack went to the rear door and kicked it open. The room was empty. The storeroom was empty, too.

"I tell you, he's gone. He got his two horses from the livery and took all his stuff and went away. He ain't coming back either," he said.

Gus was very definite about it. Jack went to the front door, looked up and down the street.

"Hey," he yelled at the sheriff, "somebody stole our horses."

The sheriff took several seconds to pull himself together. But Jack went up the street on a run. He had not reached the jail when a terrific, rending crash in the back alley stopped him. The sheriff plunged out of the Broken Bottle. Jack yelled to him.

"Cover the front!"

He ducked down the alley behind the sheriff's office just in time to see their two horses plunge off into the night dragging a couple of ropes behind them that were tied to jangling iron bars. He skidded to a stop, snapped up his gun. But the swirling adobe dust around the jail's rear blinded him. Somebody was breaking out old Pete Hale!

As the dust cleared slightly, Jack thought he heard sounds of scuffling inside the jail. He crept closer. Matt Borger could have done that job. He could have ridden to town in time to move out his goods and plan this jail break. Using the sheriff's and Jack's horses to yank down the jail would serve a double duty. It would free his own horses of the job and delay pursuit at the same time.

Yes, Borger could have done that.

The fighting ceased inside, and a gust took away the adobe haze, bringing back the clear, dark night. At the same moment a vague figure emerged through the ragged hole in the jail's wall. It was Borger carrying two saddlebags over his shoulder.

"Hello, Matt," Jack said. "The sheriff's looking for you."

Matt paused. Jack dropped to his knees.

"Damn you!" Matt cursed.

His gun blazed. Jack felt the heat of the bullet skin past his cheek. He fired point-blank. Borger dropped, lifted himself on an elbow and tried to shoot it out with Jack. But he was fighting a losing battle, for the heavy saddlebags he had stolen held him down.

When the sheriff panted up, Matt Borger was crumpled on the pile of debris he had made.

"Didn't know who chased him out of the gulch," Jack said, looking down, "or who saw him try to murder Joe. Figured his game was up in this town—but couldn't resist one last try for that load of 'nuggets'."

The sheriff nodded. "Pete," he called. "Come out of there."

Pete said a little dazedly. "Comin', sheriff."

* * *

JACK laughed as he rode along with his two old friends, Pete Hale and the sheriff.

They were headed toward the H Bar, where Joe Kisco was waiting to clear Pete of the murder charge.

"Just a bluff," Jack explained. "Figured if anybody wanted Pete's gold that bad, they'd want mine. I heard over the

mountains about Pete, and had plenty of time riding this way to think up a scheme. It worked—which is something."

The sheriff said, "John, you never done any thinking when you used to live in these parts. It don't seem natural."

"I've growed up," Jack said— "some . . ."

The two oldsters chuckled. Pete said, "The joke's on Borger—tryin' to steal a hundred pounds of lead when his pardner was camped right on top of the richest deposit of gold I ever seen. Right on the edge of the strike I been huntin' all my life."

"Where's that?" the sheriff asked.

"Why—uh—there at that little pond. There's a stratum of hard rock stretched across the gulch. Makes a sorta waterfall. The bottom of that pond's been collectin' nuggets for centuries. Like a cradle. Only bigger."

"Ride me for a burro," Jack said. "To think I could of jumped that claim."

The light shone in the kitchen window as they turned the bend in the road to come upon the Hale place. At their call, the door swung open and the girl stood in the doorway, her blonde curls like spun gold in the lamplight.

The sheriff said, "Looks to me like you'll be too busy proving up on your own claim to jump some other feller's."

"Hell," Pete said. "He had her staked out and proved up long ago—"

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The modern drive almost duplicates the old-time drive.



The Four-Legged Pioneers

By Kenneth P. Wood

From New Spain the Longhorns spread, like a mighty tide, over the western plains, their pounding hoofs building an American story that will live forever . . . Today the largest herd roams in Oklahoma, monument to the progress of an empire — and a race of men who have vanished in the setting sun !

STRUNG ALONG a street in Fort Worth, Texas, are signposts bearing the legend of the famous longhorn: "This is the path of the old McCoy cattle trail."

It was the spectacle of the trail drive, that seemingly endless trek of longhorn cattle from the great breeding grounds of Texas to the plains and railroad towns of Kansas and Nebraska—that gave the

American cow country the individuality that demanded a literary tradition to perpetuate it. Much of the present-day cowboy work and equipment have been inherited from the Mexican *vaqueros* who rode hard for the conquistadores of Old Mexico before our pioneers penetrated the Southwest. But the long drive is purely American.

In the heyday of the trail—the 1870's

and 1880's—each herd numbered from five hundred to five thousand and was driven by from six to thirty-five riders. After the Spring round-up the grass was usually ready to sustain the thundering herds and the long drive began toward the Middle-Western markets, the bawling steers hazed along by yip-yipping, gun-toting cow waddies as wild as the longhorns they drove.

Up New Mexico way, through Albuquerque, the McCoy Trail merged into the Magdalena Trail, one of the most traveled stock driveways in the United States. But, like the McCoy, this trail also has succumbed to civilization. Its death does not, however, mark the passing of the great drives, for about 25,000 steers and 60,000 sheep still travel this route annually, driven by herders in traditional garb.

The modern drive almost duplicates the old-time drive. The only exception is the regrettable absence of the once-popular longhorns, which have given way to a shorthorn breed. At one time nearly the whole prairie country, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border, "belonged" to the longhorn. Today, fewer than two hundred and fifty of the species are in existence.

Today, the largest longhorn herd is at the Wichita Mountains' Wildlife Refuge near Cache, Oklahoma, where something less than one hundred and fifty roam under the protection of the Bureau of Biological Survey, thanks to the foresightedness of the late Will C. Barnes, public official, Western author, and one-time cowman.

These animals descend from thirty breeders taken to the locality twelve years ago, when it was under the jurisdiction of the United States Forestry Service. One member of the original herd from the plains of the Lone Star State, called "Old Red" still survives, a gaunt patriarch more than twenty years old.

Eighteen other thoroughbred longhorns are on the Fort Niobara game preserve

near Valentine, Nebraska, and a few smaller bands are in private ownership.

Contrary to general belief, longhorns are not a scrub breed. They are leggy, hardy and active animals with long, sharp horns and aggressive dispositions. In color they range from black, brindle, dun, spotted buckskin, red, roan, and white to various combinations of these markings. Special characteristics are coarse hair about the forehead and in the ears, and a fish-shaped prominence of the bone structure along the top of the rump just back of the line across the hip-bones.

Slow in growth, a longhorn requires two or three more years to attain maturity than do other breeds of cattle. As the beast grows, the horns continue to expand. On record are horns with spreads of six, seven and even eight feet, from tip to tip. Under favorable conditions the species will develop into large, often fat marketable stock. Some authorities claim that the average longhorn will butcher out as much meat per hundredweight of live-stock as domestic beevies.

THE longhorns as a breed are well suited to the arid regions of the Southwest. They will graze on sparse bunch-grass and find forage on the sandy hills where domestic breeds could not exist, and they will travel a greater distance to water than will the modern beef variety. This accounted for the comparatively small loss of stock on the long overland trail drives.

Saga of the longhorn goes back to the year 1521, when the first Brahmin steers were brought to American shores by Señor Gregorio Villalobes, a governor-general of Mexico, then called New Spain. The progenitors of these imported Spanish cattle were the millions of longhorns that spread from the coastal plains of Texas to the prairie regions of the far west. They were, in fact, the pioneers of our tremendous cattle industry.

On the unfenced rangeland the animals multiplied rapidly. Even after the Civil War they were still numerous. But live-stock breeders began raising heavier, beefier cattle, and by 1920 it became apparent that only prompt action could save the Texas longhorn from complete extinction.

Like Major Gordon W. Lillie, better known as Pawnee Bill, who was instrumental in saving the American bison from extermination many years before, so Will C. Barnes made it evident that the Longhorn species was dying out and should be preserved. To Barnes, probably more than any other individual, should credit be given for the conservation of this Texas bovine. The present Wichita herd is a monument to the man's effort to save a remnant of the rugged breed of cattle so important to ranchers during the last generation.

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Little by little, twenty cows, three bulls, three steers, and four calves were rounded up and shipped to the Wichita Refuge in the fall of 1927. From this nucleus of thirty animals the herd has increased to one hundred and forty-six, the beevies being ready now to "cut out" and sell "on the hoof" . . . but for the purpose of propagation only.

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RENEGADE GALAHAD

By Ted Fox

THROUGH a window Ben Hardy saw a crowd gathering in the street before the Paradise. He pushed open the swinging doors. As he reached the saloon porch, sudden anger gripped him. He saw the man and the girl on the sidewalk a dozen feet away; Slick Kirby, swarthy gambler-owner of the Paradise, and Sue English, lovely, blue-eyed daugh-

ter of Battle City's bank president.

Slick Kirby had his arms about the girl, was trying to draw her to him. And the crowd in the street, and on the porches of the buildings on either side, made no move to interfere.

Ben bit out a curse and his fists curled down until they rested on the butts of the long-barreled Colts strapped low about

The Mojave Kid bagged a ton of .45 calibre trouble, that day he came to the rescue of the Battle City banker's daughter But he'd be damned if he'd let her trusting blue eyes rob him of his chance at her daddy's shipment of gold !



Ben faced them doggedly. He was hopelessly outnumbered, he realized.

his lithe waist. Hell, the whole town was afraid of Kirby—and of the gang of Kirby gun-slingers lined up by the porch railing to his left.

With a desperate effort the girl tried to wrench free of Kirby's grasp. She was fighting like a wildcat. But she wasn't any match for the giant gambler. Kirby was drawing her steadily closer, grinning as he leaned forward eagerly to put his fat lips on hers.

In tense, shame-faced silence the crowd of ranchers and townsmen looked on and did nothing. Ben cursed them under his breath. Out of the corners of his eyes he counted the gun-slingers to his left. Six! An even half dozen of the toughest-looking thugs you could find in a long day's ride. They were crouched, waiting for the first sign of hostility from the crowd.

With a low cry the girl wrenched one hand free and, all in the same swift motion, brought it up and across Kirby's mouth with a resounding slap. Again and again she slapped him furiously across the mouth. Kirby stepped back, a surprised look crossing his brutish face.

Then he bounced forward and his knotted right fist crashed into the girl's jaw. It was a cowardly, vicious blow. It was a powerful one, too, and it lifted the girl off her feet and slammed her to the ground on her back.

An angry mutter ran through the crowd as Kirby bounded forward and scooped the girl up into his arms. But not a rancher or townsman there made a move to go to her aid.

The lean, sun-blackened young stranger stepped stiffly forward to the edge of the saloon porch. "Let go of that girl, yuh dirty, low-livered skunk," he snapped.

Even as he said it Ben cursed himself for a damn fool. For two days he'd laid low here in Battle City, waiting for Kelsey and Hog Brandt to join him, and laying his plans to hold up the mine payroll. Now every eye in town was bent on him. Some-

one might recognize him, he knew, might shout it to the house-tops that he was the Mojave Kid, toughest young owlhooter in the whole state of Arizona.

But, hell, he couldn't stand by any longer and see the swarthy gambler manhandling this slim, gentle-faced girl. They said the Mojave Kid was tough and mean, a cold-blooded, heartless killer. Maybe he was. Maybe he was all of that and a lot more beside, but at least he didn't believe in mistreating women. And he wasn't a coward.

FOR one split second Kirby stood frozen, staring in astonishment at the lean young stranger. Out of the corners of his eyes Ben saw the gambler's six gun-slingers whirl about to face him. The crowd's reaction was to scatter, backing up against the sides of buildings, slithering up alleys and into doorways in a mad scramble to get out of the way of any bullets that might start flying in the next few seconds.

Kirby let Sue English slip out of his arms to the ground. Then he stepped up onto the sidewalk and fell slowly into a crouch.

"I hope you got the guts to back up those words with guns," he snarled. "Nobody can call me that and get away with it, young feller."

"You talk too much," Ben answered quietly. "If it's a fight you want, go ahead. I'm waitin'."

No backing out now, Ben thought tensely. Nor did he want to. He was seething with a cold, blind fury. It made him see red when he thought of anyone treating a girl that way, and especially a girl as sweet and gentle as Sue English. Ben had seen a lot of Sue in the last two days, though he'd never spoken to her once. He'd seen her on the street and in stores and he'd walked by her father's house a dozen times or more on the chance he might catch a glimpse of her.

With blinding speed Slick Kirby streaked for his holstered guns. They came up into his hands and flamed and roared. Just once. Then they were spinning into the air—as Ben's bullets tore them from his grasp. Ben was shooting fast and hard. The roar of his shots was a steady blur of thunder. Black powder-smoke swirled up around his waist. He shifted his defense toward Kirby's men.

With a scream of pain the nearest man dropped his guns and hugged his shattered wrist to his chest. The others were drawing their Colts and spreading out across the porch. Ben faced them doggedly. He was hopelessly outnumbered, he realized.

Then abruptly, with a wild shout of rage, a tall, white-haired oldster raced out of the bank building across the street. A scattergun was clutched in both hands. For a fraction of a second the six gun-slingers hesitated, glancing in his direction.

Then the oldster was bounding across the street and up the steps to Ben's side.

"Drop those guns," he snapped at Kirby's thugs. "Drop 'em or I'll let you have both barrels."

Ben held his fire as the six men hesitated. A scattergun in the hands of old John English, Sue's father, was something they hadn't reckoned on. They glanced at each other nervously. A shotgun at this close range, was worth a dozen pairs of Colts. Ben could see hate and indecision playing across their ugly faces. Then came fear, and he knew the fight was over.

Abruptly Ben's right-hand gun exploded. The revolver Slick Kirby had been reaching for, slithered off the sidewalk into the street.

"Don't try that again," Ben said coldly, "or I'll kill yuh."

He should have done that in the first place, he thought disgustedly. Kirby didn't deserve to live, after the way he'd treated Sue English. But if Ben killed him it

would mean an investigation and a lot of fool questions and the end of his plans to hold up the mine payroll.

One by one the six thugs let their guns fall to the porch at their feet.

"There're your horses," old English growled, nodding to the hitchrack in front of the Paradise. "Get on them and ride."

With glowering, hate-filled eyes the six men strode down the steps and to the hitchrack. A second later they were mounted and riding out of town at a mad, tearing run.

BEN dropped to his knees beside the girl's body, pillowing her head in the crook of his left arm. A few drops of blood trickled from one corner of her bruised mouth.

John English faced Kirby. "You've been hounding my daughter, trying to draw me into a fight," he was saying. "If you think you can get control of my bank by killing me, why don't you fight me man to man? Leave your gun-slicks at home, Kirby, and I'll meet you any time and place you say. Or are you as yellow as I think you are?"

The big gambler flushed, and his little pig eyes gleamed dangerously. But he made no move to pick up his guns, made no comment. Swarthy face expressionless as a mask, he strode up the steps past the banker and disappeared into the saloon.

With a groan Sue stirred and opened her eyes. For a moment she lay still, looking up into Ben's face dazedly. It was a moment the young owlhooter would never forget, holding her there in his arms, the soft fragrance of her hair sending the blood pounding through his veins.

Then, with a low cry, she rose to her feet. Ben stood up beside her and steadied her as she swayed and put a hand to her head.

"I'm all right," she gasped. "Just a little dizzy."

Her father was at her other side. "Come

in the bank and rest for a minute," he growled. "You too, stranger."

With a grin to himself Ben took Sue's elbow and helped her across the street and up the steps to the bank. Like prairie dogs coming out of their holes after a storm, the townsmen and ranchers were emerging slowly from the saloons and stores on both sides of the wide main street. They looked at Ben curiously as he passed, lowered their heads shamefacedly before the old banker's scornful gaze.

On a leather sofa in a rear office of the bank they made Sue lie down. John English turned to Ben, holding out his hand.

"I owe you a lot, stranger," he said grimly. "You were the only one out there with the decency of a full-blooded man. Damn good shooting, too. If you're looking for a job I could use a gent like you."

Ben ignored the hand. His eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't need a job," he answered shortly.

English scowled. "A man who's a good shot as well as brave and decent is pretty hard to find in this town," he said. "What do you say to trying the job out for a day at least? The work isn't hard."

"What is it?" Ben asked.

"There's a two-weeks' payroll leaving for the Golden Fleece Mine this afternoon, and I need someone to ride shotgun," English explained. "How about it?"

Ben stared at the old banker in blank-faced astonishment. He wanted to throw back his head and burst right out laughing. It was like a dizzy cock-eyed dream. Things like this didn't happen in real life. Here he was being asked to guard the very payroll he'd planned on robbing.

"I need a good man the worst kind of way," English went on when Ben hesitated. "You see, the bank's responsible for payroll shipments until they reach the mines, and we had a report the other day that the Mojave Kid and his gang are headed this way."

Ben stiffened at mention of that name. Now he let the wind whistle slowly out through clenched teeth. Sue English was looking at him. He had a hard time keeping a straight face. This was getting better and better all the time, he thought, chuckling inwardly.

So they wanted to hire Ben Hardy to protect a shipment of money from the Mojave Kid! Maybe that wasn't cock-eyed! Maybe it wasn't the damndest bit of luck that had ever been dropped squarely into an owlhooter's lap But it certainly sounded like it to Ben Hardy, alias the Mojave Kid.

Ben tried to keep his eagerness from sounding in his voice. "I guess there'd be no harm in trying it once" he said. "What time of day do I go?"

A pleased smile overspread the old banker's leathery face. "Two o'clock this afternoon," he answered and, seizing Ben's hand, gave it a hard squeeze. "I'm much obliged to you, son. I feel a heap easier about that money now that you've agreed to go along and guard it."

"How do you know you can trust me?" Ben asked. "You never saw me before a couple minutes ago. How do you know I'm not the Mojave Kid, for instance?"

English laughed shortly. "In the first place, I think I'm a pretty good judge of character," he said. "In the second place, the Mojave Kid wouldn't have done what you did for my daughter. He's a killer. You can smell his breed a mile off."

Ben's face hardened suddenly. Five years ago he'd stolen money to pay a doctor to save his kid sister's life. Caught in the act, he'd had to make a run for it, with a posse howling at his heels. Sure, he was tough. Hell, you couldn't roam the owlhoot trail as long as he had and keep on being an angel. But he wasn't mean, and he wasn't a killer, as English seemed to believe. He resented it when folks called him that. He had to eat, didn't he? He had to have money. It wasn't his fault he

had to fight for everything in life, including life itself. They hadn't given him a chance to earn an honest living, or to pay back the money he'd stolen. They'd wanted to send him to the penitentiary for a ten-year stretch.

"I'll be here at two o'clock sharp," Ben said as he turned to the door. "I'll do my best to see that payroll delivered to the right party. That's all I can promise."

BEN was chuckling to himself as he left the bank and started up the street to the stable where he had left his horse. There was no doubt about the mine payroll being delivered to the right party, he thought exultantly. Right into his own hands, by God. It would be a big haul, one of the biggest and easiest hauls the Mojave Kid had ever run across.

Ben broke off in his stride suddenly, at sight of two horsemen riding into town up the main street. They passed him without a glance and stopped before the Paradise. Ben watched them swing out of leather and clump up the steps into the saloon.

Then he followed. Except for the fat man behind the bar and the two strangers, just sitting down at a table in the far corner, the Paradise was empty. Ben crossed the room and dropped into a chair facing them.

"Howdy, Kid," Hog Brandt growled, and Kelsey nodded. "What's the layout?"

"Ben Hardy's the name here," Ben answered sharply, "and don't forget it."

The two men looked at each other and grinned. Swiftly then, Ben told of the mine payroll and the job offered him by old John English.

Kelsey whistled softly when he was finished. "Damned if we ain't runnin' over with luck. How we gonna work it, Kid?"

Ben opened his mouth to reply, but Ben's hands dropped to the butts of his sixguns. Checked himself as a door at the

back of the room opened and Slick Kirby stepped into the saloon. Kirby glanced in the direction of the table, turned suddenly and came toward them, a slow smile spreading across his swarthy face.

"Well, if it ain't my old side-kicks, Kelsey and Hog Brandt," the gambler sneered, and shot Ben a cold glance.

"Howdy, Slick," Brandt answered. "Meet our new boss. His name's Ben Hardy."

"We've already met," Kirby replied evenly. "We better forget that ruckus this morning, Hardy. But next time I'd advise you to keep your nose out of other people's affairs."

"Thanks," Ben said. "I'll remember that."

Kirby drew up a chair and sat down. "What're you doing up here?" he asked. "Last I heard you were working the Border country. I heard you'd teamed up with the Mojave Kid and were cleaning up on—"

His words dribbled off slowly and his gaze flashed to Ben. Then he whistled.

"So that's it—Ben Hardy, alias the Mojave Kid. I thought that shooting of yours was a little too good for an ordinary cowpuncher."

Ben tensed. Having Kirby know his identity wasn't so good, he thought grimly. The big gambler hated him. It was stamped all over his swarthy, hawk-like face.

"There's only one thing could bring you three to Battle City," Kirby went on, his eyes narrowing shrewdly, "and that's the Golden Fleece payroll. Am I right?"

"Sure," Kelsey said before Ben could stop him. "The old coot over at the bank got down on his knees practically and begged the Kid to ride along as shotgun guard. He's just givin' us the payroll."

Kirby's eyes glistened. "I've been waiting a long time for a chance like this," he growled and placed his hands on the tabletop in plain sight, "so I'm dealing myself

into this hand, gents, whether you like it or not. I can use a share in that payroll right now."

Kelsey and Hog Brandt exchanged quick glances.

"It's okay by us," Kelsey said. "I ain't forgetting the days we used to be partners."

"But you're kind of forgetting I'm the one that gives orders around here," Ben snapped.

Kirby grinned. "I'd hate to have to let it slip out who you are," he sneered. "All your nice laid plans would go up in smoke, wouldn't they?"

With a violent effort Ben controlled the dull rage that suddenly gripped him.

"I reckon I know what you're thinking," Kirby continued, in the same even tones. "You're wondering why the hell you didn't kill me instead of shooting the guns out of my hands this morning. You're figuring right now some way of doing the job over again." He laughed shortly. "It's no use, Hardy. I won't fight. I know a good thing when I see it."

Ben forced a thin smile to his lips. He suddenly felt helpless. His hands were tied, just as surely as though they were bound with ropes. There wasn't any way to keep Kirby from horning in—unless he killed him. But Kirby wouldn't fight.

"There's a deserted shack five miles out on the mountain road," Ben said, rising to his feet. "Wait there for us. That's where we'll take the money away from the driver."

TURNING on his heel, Ben strode from the room. One minute more in the company of Slick Kirby, and he knew he'd pull his guns and kill the gambler whether he'd fight back or not. Kelsey and Hog Brandt had gone too far this time in agreeing to having the swarthy gambler join them in the holdup. Kelsey had been getting a swelled head of late, giving orders and doing things the way he liked instead

of the way he'd been told. And when anyone thought he was as good or better than the Mojave Kid, it was time for a reckoning.

Seething with a cold, deadly rage, Ben strode up the street to the nearest restaurant for some lunch. Through the window at his elbow he saw his two men and Slick Kirby come out of the saloon a few minutes later, mount their horses and ride away down the street.

Then, at five minutes before two, he entered the bank building. Sue English and her father were waiting for him in the back office. At sight of Sue, pretty, and slim, Ben felt a great longing knife its way through him. He'd never dreamed anyone could be as sweet and lovely as Sue English.

Dreams! Hell, that was all it ever could be, he thought bitterly. He must never let himself forget that he was the Mojave Kid, outlaw and hunted man.

John English handed Ben a double-barreled shotgun and, with a nod, led the way out of the alley between the bank and the building next door. A buckboard and a team of nervous broncs stood there. The driver, a thin, hawk-nosed man, was already up on the seat, clutching the reins. Armed guards stood at both entrances to the alley.

Ben stared in surprise at the two saddled horses. He felt a sudden sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach when he saw English and her father pick up the reins and swing into leather.

"We're going with you," Sue said, with a smile. "The mine superintendent is a friend of ours and we're going to pay him a surprise visit. Don't look so angry."

With an effort, Ben smiled. It wasn't anger he was feeling, he thought grimly. It was dismay, because he knew John English would put up a fight when Kelsey and the others took the money. He'd be killed. And Sue!

With a grim tightening of his lips, Ben

climbed into that buckboard and sat down beside the driver. His heels scraped against the big iron-bound payroll box.

The buckboard started with a lurch. Tossing their heads into the air, the team pranced out of the alley and started up the street at a canter. Ben glanced back, saw Sue and her father following close behind. John English wore two guns strapped about his waist under his long-tailed coat. Sue was unarmed. She smiled faintly when Ben's glance met hers.

Ben turned back, with a low curse, and peered ahead, over the backs of the running team. For a while this job had promised to be the easiest he'd ever tackled. Now, all of a sudden, things started going wrong. First, Kirby had horned in claiming a split. Then Sue English and her father had decided to ride along with him.

There'd be a fight in less than an hour now. Ben knew it for a certainty, because John English was a scrapper. The bank would have to close its door if anything happened to this payroll, according to the gossip around Battle City. Ben had heard men talking about it in the saloons: how John English hadn't asked for payment on a single mortgage since the droughts had ruined half the ranchers in the valley; how he'd carried the bank along with his own small but hard-earned fortune.

Hell, taking that money would bust old John English, bust his bank, bust all the ranchers in the valley.

Well, what of it, Ben thought coldly. That was their tough luck, not his. He had to eat, too. He had to make a living one way or another, didn't he? The only way he knew how.

BEN flung a second glance over his shoulder. They'd covered two of the five miles already. He'd hoped Sue English and her father might change their minds and ride on ahead. But he saw now there was little hope of that. They were

following twenty yards behind, riding along entirely unsuspecting of the trouble that lay waiting up the trail.

All of a sudden, as he looked at Sue English, Ben knew he did care what happened to the bank. If he rode off with the payroll money and let the bank fail it would be hurting Sue and her father the worst kind of way. He didn't like the thought of that so much. Hell, they'd treated him decently, hadn't they? Treated him like a human being instead of a mad dog, the way other folks had in the past five years. They'd trusted him. No one had done that for a damn long time. It made a guy feel sort of good, sort of as though he'd like to throw back his shoulders and hold his head high with the best of them.

Mile after mile dropped away beneath the buckboard's rolling wheels. They left the open desert and entered the hills. A mile farther on they'd reach the deserted shack.

Ben glanced sideways at the hook-nosed driver and his hands curled tightly about the shotgun between his knees. He was all mixed up inside. He cursed the day he'd ever come to Battle City. Thoughts like those were crazy. They were a sure sign he was growing soft. What the hell did he care about Sue English and her father? He'd never see them after today. John English was a fool, anyway. He should know better than to trust a total stranger.

Ben broke off in his thought as the buckboard whirled around a bend and they came in sight of an old adobe shack beside the trail. At the same moment three horsemen spurred out of the sage with drawn guns. They were masked.

Ben winced when he heard Sue's startled cry behind him, heard her father's wild shout to her to turn around and run. In the same moment the driver of the buckboard pulled his team to a slithering halt, reached for a gun. Now was the

time to slap him over the head with his gun-barrel, Ben thought mechanically.

With a shattering roar John English's Colts exploded. Kelsey and the others were less than fifty yards away now, racing up, with guns flaming. They were shooting at the old banker and Sue. Another split second and father and daughter would be dead, Ben thought dully. He could see which was Kirby now, which was Kelsey, which was Hog Brandt. He could see the lower halves of their faces beneath their masks; cruel, savage faces, cold and relentless. Blind fury gripped him at the sight, and at the thought of them trying to shoot down Sue English.

Then he was standing up in the buckboard and his shotgun was bucking and flaming in his hands. He was cursing, too, cursing Sue English and her father and Kelsey and Brandt and Slick Kirby. He cursed them all out loud, but his voice was lost in the thunderous roar of guns.

With a scream, as a load of buckshot hit him, Slick Kirby folded up at the middle and pitched from his saddle. Brandt and Kelsey split and flung back on the reins. They were shooting fast and hard.

The driver of the buckboard slumped forward suddenly. His team was rearing and plunging in terror.

Hurling the scattergun from him, Ben whipped out his long barreled Colts and thumbed the hammers. Hog Brandt was lying forward on his horse's neck now, a limp, lifeless heap. John English's gun was booming steadily.

Then it hit him, knocked him from the buckboard to the ground, sent him sprawling into the dust on his back. But it didn't hurt so much. After the first shock and surprise, Ben heaved himself to his feet, shook his head savagely to clear away the mist swirling before his eyes. His left side was a little numb. That was all. The bullet had gone through.

For one long second he stood there by the buckboard, swaying dizzily on his

feet, trying to locate Kelsey over his gun-sights. Then it dawned on him that the firing had stopped and that Kelsey lay stretched out in the roadway a dozen yards away. All three of them were dead.

Turning, Ben gaped at Sue English just leaping from her horse and dropping to her knees beside her father's body. The old banker lay in a crumpled heap beside the trail. He was alive. But his leathery face was white with pain.

Fighting back the nausea that kept gagging in his throat, Ben stumbled to the banker's side, examined the wound in his leg.

"Your father'll be all right," he told Sue gently and saw some of the fear die out of her eyes. "Better get him to a doctor pretty quick, though."

How he did it Ben could never remember afterward, but somehow, with Sue's help, he hoisted John English into the back of the buckboard. Then he climbed to the driver's seat and turned the team around and headed for town.

Well, he'd done it, Ben thought dazedly. He'd thrown away ten thousand dollars in cold, hard cash. He'd be a hero, though.

But he didn't want that. All he wanted was to get his side fixed up and then get the hell out of this section of the country before his identity was discovered and he was slapped into jail. Or before he changed his mind about the payroll, Ben thought grimly. There wouldn't be anyone to split with now.

Ben gritted his teeth and looked over his shoulder at Sue. His gaze met hers, and all at once he knew the answer to that question. There was gratitude in her eyes, and trust and faith. She was smiling.

Hell, that was worth all the cash in the strongbox at his feet! A girl's smile and a girl's simple trust were more important to Ben Hardy than money. He no longer wondered whether the Mojave Kid had changed, and grown soft. He knew he had—and was damned glad of it.



Western Brain - Twisters

By Nevada Dick

Pit your wits in a quiz of Western frontier history, against an old-timer who knows the thrilling saga of the cattle country!

1. In the cowboy jargon of the old West a clergyman was a———?
2. Upon rising in the morning, what was the first piece of wearing apparel usually donned by the old-time cowhand?
3. Name the outlaw who, after being shot to death, was decapitated, his head placed on a pole and displayed in San Francisco to assure the citizens the man was really dead. It happened in 1853.
4. What is the meaning of the Mexican word, "Ramada?"
5. When forming a beef herd, many animals are "cut," shunted into a separate bunch and sold below par. What type of stock finds its way into this group?
6. What are "locked" spurs? Are they permitted in riding competition?
7. The last major battle between Indians and United States troops took place in what year?
8. What spider, usually found in western states, is considered more deadly than the rattlesnake?
9. What notorious gun-slinger was known as "Little Seven-Up?"
10. What was the difference between an Indian war arrow and a hunting arrow?
11. What is meant by a "saged horse?"
12. Name the man who killed Wild Bill Hickok.
13. In eastern states, a deep slash in the hills is called a "ravine." What is it called in the West?
14. The letters "G. T. T." marked on a missing man's door, usually meant what?
15. Is it considered proper for a horseman to wear his spurs indoors?

(For answers, see page 111)

STAGE DRIVER WANTED — DEAD OR ALIVE!

In the wreckage of the Pimas stagecoach, a gun-blasted shotgun guard lived long enough to brand his boss, young Curt Healey, as a killer and a thief . . . How could Curt hope to clear his name—when every man, bandit and posse bounty-hunter alike, had orders to kill him on sight?

By John G. Pearsol

CHAPTER ONE

Framed by a Dead Man

UP IN the driver's seat of his own coach, young Curt Healey watched admiringly as the Wells-Fargo driver wheeled the lumbering Concord around the bend into Wildhorse. Beside the big, bronzed owner of the Healey Stage Lines sat old Buff Stevens, Curt's guard, with a short-barreled shotgun across his knees. The Wells-Fargo coach was bringing a shipment of money consigned to Pimas City, which would be transferred to the Healey stage here at Wildhorse.

"Them fellas has somethin' you ought to have, Curt," Buff said. "That steel strong box. It takes dynamite to open it. Nobody on the coach carries a key. Only fellas that can open it is the station agents along the way. It's . . ."

The clatter of the oncoming coach drowned the rest of Buff Stevens' words. It rolled to a dusty, rocking stop. The driver grinned and waved at Curt. The station agent came out of his little yellow house with a key in his hand, unlocked the steel box built into the back of the coach. Buff Stevens climbed down and helped carry the six money boxes over to the Healey stage.

"I was tellin' Curt we ought to have one of them strong boxes," he remarked to the Wells-Fargo guard.



"They're plumb handy," said the guard. "But whoever steals this gold will have to wait a long time to spend it. It's a new mint. Ain't none of it in circulation. It can be spotted in a minute."

Buff climbed up onto the seat beside Curt. "That won't keep a bullet out of a

STAGE DRIVER WANTED — DEAD OR ALIVE!

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CHAPTER ONE

Framed by a Dead Man

UP IN the driver's seat of his own coach, young Curt Healey watched admiringly as the Wells-Fargo driver wheeled the lumbering Concord around the bend into Wildhorse. Beside the big, bronzed owner of the Healey Stage Lines sat old Buff Stevens, Curt's guard, with a short-barreled shotgun across his knees. The Wells-Fargo coach was bringing a shipment of money consigned to Pimas City, which would be transferred to the Healey stage here at Wildhorse.

"Them fellas has somethin' you ought to have, Curt," Buff said. "That steel strong box. It takes dynamite to open it. Nobody on the coach carries a key. Only fellas that can open it is the station agents along the way. It's . . ."

The clatter of the oncoming coach drowned the rest of Buff Stevens' words. It rolled to a dusty, rocking stop. The driver grinned and waved at Curt. The station agent came out of his little yellow house with a key in his hand, unlocked the steel box built into the back of the coach. Buff Stevens climbed down and helped carry the six money boxes over to the Healey stage.

"I was tellin' Curt we ought to have one of them strong boxes," he remarked to the Wells-Fargo guard.



"They're plumb handy," said the guard. "But whoever steals this gold will have to wait a long time to spend it. It's a new mint. Ain't none of it in circulation. It can be spotted in a minute."

Buff climbed up onto the seat beside Curt. "That won't keep a bullet out of a

A novelette of a Western fugitive who refused to run



Buff Stevens raised his shotgun. It blared once.

stage guard's brisket." He grinned as he placed his shotgun across his knees.

The Wells-Fargo coach surged into motion and went rumbling down the trail. Curt Healey turned his own team after the bigger coach had vanished. He always liked to sit there and watch it leave. He liked to dream about the time when the Healey Stage Lines would be bigger, with

more and better coaches, running not only between Pimas City and Wildhorse, but to the new towns that were springing up, farther south. Then maybe he, too, could have steel strong boxes built into his coaches. He and Gail Trent, when they were married, could have a real home and security, and be proud of what they had contributed toward the growth of the country.

Curt Healey jerked himself from out of his day dream. He started the team. The coach began to rock and roll beneath them

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as they sped across the sandy flats toward the hills. The pound of the horse's hoofs, the rattle of chains, the rumble of wheels, were to Curt Healey like the clatter of the machines of industry, forging another link in the chain of progress. Curt was proud of the part he was taking in the building of an empire.

THE sun, hot and brazen, soared across the sky. The trail steepened. Huge, grotesque rocks cast darkening shadows across the trail as they circled through the hills. Suddenly a shot crashed out above the rattle of the coach's wheels. Masked riders blocked the trail.

Buff Stevens raised his shotgun. It blared once. But another shot cracked out, and Buff let out a sickening groan as he wilted down onto the footboards. A dark, spreading spot showed on the breast of his denim shirt, where a bullet had struck him.

His foot hard on the brake, his hands pulling back on the lines, Curt Healey stopped the coach. Four masked figures were there in the trail, guns glinting in their hands.

"Toss the money down," said one of them.

Curt reached back and lifted one of the little boxes. He gave it a toss. It struck a rock as it landed, and a cascade of golden coins spilled out into the trail. They glittered dully in the light. Involuntarily, all eyes dropped to that shining metal in the dust.

"New gold!" one of the bandits whispered excitedly.

As though those precious yellow pieces pulled them downward, they dismounted and sank down to their knees, pawing at the coins. Curt Healey suddenly let his foot off the brake. As it whipped back, with a sharp clatter, he yelled and slapped the horses with the reins. They leaped forward. Curt hunkered down on the footboards. A bullet smashed through the

flimsy boards at his back, tore through his side, sickening him with its numbing shock.

Then the guns stopped their chatter. The bullets ceased to whistle across the stage. Curt turned his head and peered back. He saw the bandits swinging into their saddles. He grinned savagely as he lashed the team, yelling at the top of his voice. Down at his feet, on the up-curved footboards, old Buff Stevens lay dying, lax, powerless, but with the flash of approval in his fast dimming eyes.

Curt's heart sank as he turned his head again. The four bandits were not following him. They were bearing around the hill to cut him off, to get ahead of him! As they vanished from sight Curt slapped the brake down hard. He pulled the team to a halt.

He hoisted the boxes of gold coins down to the ground, carried them up into the rocks and hid them in a nest of boulders. He hurried back toward the stage, panting, his head spinning, weakened by the loss of blood.

In the thickening dusk, he could see the dim figures of the bandits come out from behind the hill, far down the trail. Suddenly something frightened the stage horses. They reared and started to run wildly, the coach careening crazily behind them. A wheel struck a rock and the coach bounced, reeled like a drunken thing and smashed over on its side.

Hidden in the rocks, Curt watched while the bandits dashed up to the stage and ransacked it. Their voices came to him as they began to search for him when they failed to find the rest of the gold. In the near darkness they rode past him. One of them lifted his bandana mask, wiped a sweaty face with it, and Curt Healey looked on the dark features of Dutch Garr, a gunman who worked for Dirk Zeida, the gambler in Pimas City.

Curt stayed very still, listening to the sound of their horses' hoofs in the rocks.

If they found him they'd try to make him tell where he'd hidden the gold. If he could get to town he could accuse Dutch Garr of murder and attempted robbery. He could direct a posse to where the gold was hidden. . . .

THE hills seemed to whisper with sound as Curt hunkered there in the darkness. He stayed still. After an hour there was a movement and the sound of voices down at the stage. Curt couldn't tell who it was—the bandits or someone else. Then he heard the sound of the stage being righted, being driven away. He rose and shuffled tiredly in the direction of town. He stumbled against rocks as he picked his way through the darkness.

Down on the flats his boots sank deeply into the soft sand as he shuffled wearily along. The wound in his side kept bleeding, and he pressed his hand against it to try to stop the flow of blood. The moon peeped up from behind the hills, casting a ghostly glow on the desert.

Hoofbeats came through the night. Curt sank down beneath the shelter of a thorny mesquite, as six riders loped past him in the moonlight.

"Who'd a thought that Curt Healey woulda gone crooked," one rider said.

"Yuh never can tell," said another. "Too much gold. . . ."

Then they were gone. The subdued swish of the horses' hoofs in the sand were like mocking whispers in Curt Healey's ears, as he stared after them in amazement. He rose to his feet to shout at them, then frowned and faced the direction of town again. What the hell did they mean, "Curt Healey gone crooked?"

The dim, distant lights of Pimas City twinkled far off at the edge of the world. Curt stumbled drunkenly toward them. Curt Healey crooked! Who said so? Why?

A lone rider, who came across the flats, drove Curt to cover again. Curt gripped

his gun in his hand, his eyes narrowing, cautious, wary. He sank down behind a mesquite while old Doc Deever, the town drunk, rode slowly along, mounted on a tiny burro, his feet nearly dragging the ground as the beast plodded along.

Curt let Doc Deever get past, then stepped out. "Doc," he called.

Deever stopped. He turned the mule slowly, stared at Curt.

"What's this about me bein' crooked, Doc?" Curt asked.

Doc Deever nodded. The moonlight glinted on the handle of a gun thrust into the waistband of his trousers. His hand strayed toward it, then fell down at his side. His eyes became welded to the gun that Curt Healey held in his hand.

"Much as I hate to say it," he said deliberately, "everybody knows you are crooked. You're a crook and a murderer. There's a reward on your head, dead or alive."

IT WAS as though a bucket of ice water had suddenly drenched Curt Healey. Swaying weakly, he tried to digest Doc's words, tried to tell himself this was unreal, a dream. But Doc Deever, standing there just a few feet from him, was real; there wasn't anything imaginary about the sickening stench of stale whiskey that emanated from him. And the throb in Curt's side, and the deadly, sickening weakness of him was real.

"And what did I do that was crooked?" Curt asked Doc. "Who did I murder?"

"You murdered old Buff Stevens," Deever said positively. "You shot him and took the gold off the stage. When the stage didn't come in on time some punchers from Barrow's Big B went out to see what was wrong. They found the stage, but the gold was gone. They found Buff Stevens. He was still alive. There's no argument to it, Healey. Buff accused you of it. Fifty men heard him say it just a few seconds before he died."

"What did Buff say?" asked Curt. "There's a hellish mistake here, Doc. Tell me exactly what he said."

"He said, 'Curt got the money. The dirty' . . . And then he died. I reckon he said enough."

Curt Healey opened his mouth, then closed it. He knew what old Buff had been trying to tell them. Knowing he had just a minute to live, he'd told them first that Curt had saved the money. He'd started to tell them something about the bandits. He'd started to call them dirty sons. He'd died just when it would sound as though he was cursing Curt Healey. It would take a miracle to make anybody believe anything except the implication of old Buff's words.

Slowly, Curt raised his gun, pointed it at Doc Deever. "Drop your gun down on the ground, Doc," he said. "Then ride on toward the hills. I didn't shoot Buff. I didn't steal any gold. But I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you that."

"I'd say you was a damn liar if you tried it," said Doc Deever.

He took his gun carefully from his pants, dropped it in the sand. He straightened his bent back, held his head up a little higher.

"I've never been much good," he said coldly. "I've been a drunken bum. But, compared to you, I'm a saint. I'm going to think more of myself from now on, Healey!"

Doc Deever drubbed his heels into the burro's sides. The little beast started its slow, plodding shuffle forward. Curt watched till Doc was out of sight, then he turned and marched toward the tiny yellow lights of Pimas City that blinked in the distance.

His heart hammered hard in his breast. Resentment burned within him. He reckoned that even though the words Buck Stevens had spoken before he died were incriminating, folks shouldn't have jumped at the conclusion that he was a

thief and a murderer! At least, they might give him a chance to explain.

As he stumbled on, his bloody side aching, the weakness within him growing, the distant lights of town began to dance crazily in Curt's eyes. His shuffling steps began to falter. His vision dimmed. Suddenly he flopped over on his face, lay unmoving in the sand.

CHAPTER TWO

Bushwhack Murder

CURT HEALEY opened his eyes. He was in bed. He recognized the room in which he lay. It was in the little house where Gail Trent lived, behind the livery stable at the edge of town. After the death of her father Gail had kept on running his livery. Curt stabled his teams there.

Gail was sitting in the chair beside Curt now. She smiled at him as he opened his eyes. But her smile was wan. Her eyes were tired.

"You look better," she told him. "Your wound wasn't serious. It was loss of blood that weakened you. I heard all about it when they brought the stage in. I heard what Buff Stevens said, but I didn't believe it. I went out and found you. I managed to get you here without anyone seeing you. You've been asleep all night and all day."

Curt looked at the lighted lamp in the room. He'd slept the day through, and now it was night again. He pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the bed.

"This is what happened," he said, then he told her all of it. "And now," he ended, "I'll tell Sheriff Luke Storm. I'll make him believe it if I have to cram it down his throat!"

Gail Trent smiled grimly as she shook her head. "Luke Storm would put you in jail," she said, "and a hundred crazy fools would break down the jail and lynch you! Everybody in Pimas City believes that Buff Stevens accused you of his murder

and of stealing the gold. All the talk in the world wouldn't change their minds. You'll have to *prove* you didn't do it, Curt. They figure that it's already proved that you did do it."

Curt sat there on the edge of the bed and stared at Gail Trent. It was hard as hell for him to *sabe* all this. The ironical twist of fate that had made Buff Stevens die just when he did was hard to grasp. The very fact that Curt had hidden the gold, trying to save it, made it appear that he was stealing it.

"But there will be some way to prove it all," Gail Trent said, comfortingly.

Now that it had sunk into his stunned consciousness, Curt wasn't sure that there would be a way to prove anything. With a dazed expression in his eyes, he watched the girl go out of the room and come back a minute later with a tray of food. He toyed with it, ate it finally. He felt better physically. But the puzzle in his mind tormented him. How could he ever *prove* he hadn't killed Buff? There was no way—unless he made Dutch Garr confess.

Curt's jaw set grimly. He rose to his feet. His legs were fairly steady. The tight bandage about his side, placed there by Gail, had stopped the aching torment in his body.

Suddenly his eyes fastened on the knob of the door that led into the room. It was turning, slowly, quietly.

Gail's eyes followed Curt's. She drew in her breath sharply as the door swung inward. Curt took a quick step toward the chair where his belt and guns hung. But he stopped and slowly raised his hands above his head as a tall, dark-clothed, masked man, with a gun in his hand, stepped into the room. In the doorway behind him were two others, also masked. Their guns were out, pointed at Curt. Curt guessed they were three of the four men who had held up the stage.

"Come on, Curt," said the dark-clothed man. "We're gonna take a ride."

His voice was gruff, husky. He motioned with his gun. Curt moved slowly toward the door.

"If you raise a racket," the fellow said to Gail, "we'll kill Curt Healey!"

Gail Trent shook her head. Her face was white. Fear flecked her wide, startled eyes.

"I won't raise a racket," she said. "But if you're vigilantes you're making an awful mistake. Curt didn't steal the gold. He hid it so the bandits wouldn't get it. He didn't shoot Buff Stevens. He—"

"We know he hid it," said the masked man.

The subtle menace in his voice blanched Gail Trent's face whiter. Curt Healey tried to grin re-assuringly at her as he went out the door, a gun muzzle pressed tightly against his back.

IN THE darkness of the alleyway behind the house four horses stood.

"Climb into a saddle and ride outa town slow," the spokesman for the trio said. "If you try any funny business we'll kill you quick. There's a reward on your head. We can kill you and there'll be no questions asked."

Slowly, through the darkness, Curt rode. They met no one. They climbed into the hills. Curt was sure that one of them behind him was Dutch Garr. He wondered where the fourth bandit was. Since one of them was Dutch Garr, he reckoned another must be Dirk Zeida, because Garr was Zeida's gunman, did his dirty work in Zeida's gambling hall. Another might be Charley Ott.

"Stop here," said the gruff-voiced spokesman as they reached a rocky place in the hills. "Get off your horse."

Curt climbed down. They all dismounted. Two of them held pistols in their hands. The other came toward Curt empty handed.

"Kill him if he raises his hands above his waist," he said to the two behind him.

He reached out and struck Curt in the face with a clenched fist.

"Where did you hide the gold when you stopped behind the hill?" he asked.

Curt staggered back, but he knew that as long as he kept his tongue behind his teeth he would live. As soon as he talked he would die. He'd get hell beat out of him, but they wouldn't kill him, so long as they thought there was a chance of making him tell where he had hidden the gold.

Curt shook his head. He took a swing at the masked man in front of him, tried to tear the bandana off his face. But he was slow. One of the men who held guns in their hands stepped forward and cracked a pistol barrel across Curt's head. He stumbled dazedly, staggered around in a circle.

"Talk," said the husky-voiced gent.

He chuckled, hit Curt again, knocked him down. Before Curt could get up, the hombre began to kick him. The sharp boot toe struck Curt's wounded side. The fiery agony of it sent stabs of pain to Curt Healey's brain. He rolled over, away from it, rose weakly to his hands and knees, then groggily to his feet. His dazed mind kept groping around, frantically, to find a way to stop this torture, to keep the fists from striking him in the face, to keep the boot from thumping against his wounded side. But he must not tell where he had hidden the gold. If he talked he'd die!

The fist struck him again, knocked him back against the rocks. His knees buckled and he fell to the ground. That boot toe began to thud against his wounded side again. That hellish, husky, hateful voice kept hammering at him.

"Talk!" it said repeatedly. "Where's the gold, damn you?"

Then Curt remembered what the Wells-Fargo guard had told him.

"What good would it do you to get it?" Curt gasped weakly. "You can't spend it. It's a new mint. There's none of it in cir-

culatation. If you spend one piece of it they'll grab you, and do it quick!"

THE boot, poised for another kick, came slowly down to earth. Doubt, uncertainty seemed to settle down over the three masked men there in the rocky clearing. They looked at each other, then at Curt Healey. Curt rose to his feet, leaned back against a rock.

"What's that you said?" asked the husky-voiced one who had done the talking. "You said we couldn't spend it?"

"You can spend it if you want to go to jail," Curt panted. "But they'll nab you the minute you do. It's a new design, and this is the first shipment that's come to this part of the country. The bank knows that, and by now the law knows it. They'll be watching for it. You better send back the one box you got and call it a day."

The man who had been beating Curt stared questioningly at the others, then looked at Curt. He seemed to be affected more than the others by what Curt had said.

"I bought some clothes at Louie Brettler's," he said finally. "I gave him one of them new gold pieces!"

Curt Healey wanted to laugh. Here was a break! They'd trapped themselves!

"We gotta get that back," one of them said. "We got to shut Brettler's mouth before he tells where it came from."

The husky-voiced gent pointed at one of the others.

"Stay here with Healey," he snapped. Then, to the other: "Come on!"

They leaped onto their horses and raced away. Curt Healey stood there, leaning back against the rock, his senses clearing, a little strength coming back to him now. Slowly, he sank down and rested, gradually realizing that he'd signed old Louie Brettler's death warrant. They'd kill the old storekeeper in Pimas City right away. They had to. Curt tried to think of some

(Continued on page 100)

LAST-CHANCE TRAIL TO GLORY

By H. S. M. Kemp

Why did the ice-eyed puncher from Arizona lay traps for pelt in Idaho's cold? The answer came one bloody day in Soda Flats when he had to fight lead with fists to save the life of his north-country sweetheart—and square an overdue Boothill debt!

DEL PEARSON rode into Soda Flats on a hammer-headed sorrel gelding with a loaded pack-mare following along behind. His clothing, outfit, even his lean, hard face bore a coat of trail-dust and it was with evident satisfaction that he swung down and walked into the coolness of Bob's General Store.

Bob Britton nodded. "Plenty hot."

"Yeah," agreed the newcomer. "For the Fall. Or is this what you expect in Idaho all the time?"

"Dunno whether we expect it or not," grinned Bob. "But a month from now we'll be wondering where it went."

The newcomer pushed back his Stetson and pulled out tobacco and papers. Watching him as he stood there—spread-legged, long nervous fingers building the smoke—Bob Britton fell to speculating who he was and whence he came.

"Name of Pearson," he said. "Del Pearson. From Arizona, and points south."

"Quite a ways from here," observed Bob.

The man merely nodded and said, "I'm lookin' for a trappin' district. Could you help a feller out?"

Del Pearson seemed to sense that something was wrong.



Bob Britton frowned slightly. "A trapping district? You?"

"Why not?" countered the man. "Punchin' cows is all right in summer, but when the north-easters begin to whistle—well, life's too short for that."

"Done much trapping?"

"Never made a fortune at it, but I can keep myself in beans and coffee."

Bob grunted, and fell into a thoughtful silence. In the interval, the door that connected with his living-quarters opened, and a girl came through.

Dressed in a simple frock, she was dusky-eyed and dainty and of vivid coloring. She set a pan of eggs on the counter. Del Pearson slid down and touched the brim of his hat.

Bob hesitated; then he said, "Here, Pat, this is Del Pearson." And, to Pearson: "My sister—home on a visit."

Afterward, Bob wondered why he did this. He didn't know Del Pearson, nor was there any reason why he should want to know him. The girl extended her hand, and smiled.

"From around this district, Mister Pearson?"

Pearson blushed awkwardly. "No, ma'am. From down Arizona way."

They might have said more, but Bob took up his earlier conversation. "If it's a trapping district you want, Pearson, you'll probably locate one. West of here is mountain country. It's hard to get into, but once there, you'll find the fur."

Pearson nodded. "I'm not crowded none for time. Winter won't set in just yet." Then he asked, "Any sort of a hotel here where a feller could put up?"

"Sure," Bob said. "The Buffalo's Head. Next block to this."

Pearson nodded, touched his hat to the girl. "Thanks. I'll be seein' you ag'in."

Bob watched him swing into saddle, ride down the dusty street. Then he heard his sister, Pat, speaking.

"He's awfully good looking, isn't he?"

Bob grunted. "Six or seven hundred miles is a long way to come to locate a trapping district. If he wants to trap, why didn't he go after wolves in his own country? Or hit for the mountains of Utah?"

The girl said nothing, but Bob thought of the gun at Pearson's hip—well forward, and easy to get at; of the carbine in the saddle-boot, and the lean hardness of the man's face. When he had spoken to Bob his eyes seemed equally hard. Gray-blue, Bob could vision them if the man were roused and drew that .45.

Bob turned, smiled down at Pat. "Just a trapping cowboy trying to get along—maybe!"

EARLY that evening, with Pat off visiting friends, Bob walked down to the Buffalo's Head. Del Pearson was in a poker game.

Bob liked poker but not well enough to buck the men playing with Del Pearson. Riff-raff of the town, the five were crooked as a snake's back—with Dutchy Schmidt the crookedest of the lot. Three quarts of liquor were on the table.

Bob joined the spectators around the table, and in half an hour saw Pearson drop two hundred dollars. The man's face was a mask. Occasionally he rolled a cigarette or took a drink. Once he looked up, caught sight of Bob, and nodded shortly.

Bob wanted to warn the man, to tell him he could not hope to win against Dutchy and his pals. But warning was unnecessary. Del Pearson himself seemed to sense that something was wrong. When the deal came his way, he riffled the cards together, took them in his long fingers and tore the whole pack in half.

Bob was stunned. The display of strength was as impressive as it was casual. Then Pearson was speaking to Dutchy Schmidt. "How about some new ones?"

Dutchy, red-faced and bull-necked, glared at him truculently. "What's wrong with them you had?"

"Nothin', mebbe," said Pearson. "Only I want some more. Seems like," he added, "I'm payin' for them."

Dutchy glared at him for a moment, then called to the clerk at the desk. When the new cards came, the game continued.

But Pearson's luck still went down. Bob watched closely, trying to see what was happening. The deal reached Dutchy. Schmidt started to flip the first card. Pearson, with lightning movement, grabbed the cards from his hands.

"Hold it!" he called sharply. "I'm makin' a count!"

Dutchy cursed, sprang up, two cards fluttered to the table-top. Face up they fell—the joker, and the ace of spades.

Action broke so swiftly that Bob Britton couldn't follow it. Dutchy lunged across the table, the table went over and two players went down. But when the table was kicked away, Bob saw Schmidt, who weighed two hundred pounds, being cut to ribbons in the most cold-blooded and savage battle that Soda Flats had ever witnessed. As Dutchy blundered in ham-like fists flailing, Del Pearson merely chopped at him, laughing tauntingly.

When it was over, and Schmidt lay unconscious on the floor, Pearson blew on his skinned knuckles and suggested they get on with the game. But Schmidt's pale pards raked up their winnings and hurried off. Bob Britton walked away, too. As he made his way to his store, he shook his head.

"With strength like that and the ice-cold temper of the devil," Britton murmured to himself, "I don't know who you are, Del Pearson, but I do know you're a dangerous man."

HOME, Bob found Pat banging industriously away on a typewriter, a pile of finished manuscript at her side.

"Working at the new book?"

"Why not?" the girl countered. "The first went over so well that I've been asked to do another."

"Another, like the first one—'The Man I Love'? Who reads mush of that sort?"

Hurt tinged the girl's dusky eyes.

Bob was penitent immediately. "Never mind me, Pat. I'm just kidding." Then he added, "I was down to the Buffalo's Head." The girl frowned. "Yeah," he went on. "And I ran into our Mister Pearson again. Quite a character, when you get to know him."

He gave Pat an account of the poker game and the fight. When he finished, the girl just stared at him and didn't speak.

Del Pearson walked into the store early the next morning.

Bob looked at him keenly. Last night the man had drunk almost a quart of raw liquor, lost at least two hundred dollars, and wound up in a brutal fist-fight. Now, instead of looking like the morning-after, Pearson was clean-shaven and clear-eyed. The faintest of smiles was about his thin lips.

"Get you out of bed?" he asked.

"Been up for hours," said Bob. "What can I do for you?"

"Show me a map of the Sawtooth country—if you have one."

Bob fetched the map, spread it on the counter-top. Pearson thought of locating in the Sawtooths.

"There's an old ranch in there," he said, "but it'll come in handy. I'll pack into the mountains and get in shape; but I'll have to take the horses out and leave 'em at some ranch for the winter. Snow'll be too deep for them to rustle for 'em-selves."

They talked for a few minutes, then Pat came in. She pulled up short, said innocently, "I didn't know you were busy."

"We're not busy," grunted Bob. "Why? Something you want?"

"Some soap. Toilet soap."

Bob went back for it. When he returned Pat was speaking to Del Pearson.

"You come from Arizona," she said. "That's a place I'd love to see. And some day I will."

Pearson nodded, and began to blush. "Yes, ma'am," he said. "It's a nice country. You'd like it."

Pat wanted to know how far it was by road, how many days by railway. She asked him about the Grand Canyon, the Painted Desert. Then it struck Bob Britton that Pat was doing most of the talking. With new interest Bob watched his sister and the man from Arizona.

Pearson now, didn't look hard, nor dangerous. He seemed bashful, hesitant. He replied to Pat's questions, but his manner was that of a man looking at the mountains or a sunset for the first time. He appeared awed, gripped by the spell of something beyond him. Then Pat asked him up for dinner, and Bob blinked.

"There are *so* many things I want to know about Arizona," the girl said eagerly, "but my water is boiling away. And you'll come—some time about twelve o'clock?"

Britton frowned. Things were developing too thick and fast for his liking. Del Pearson was good-looking, and personable; but he was not the man his kid sister ought to really know. And within the past few minutes, Pat seemed to have lost her head entirely. Pat Britton, who should know better, was literally throwing herself at this swashbuckler's feet.

Pearson was stammering his acceptance of Pat's invitation. "Well, ma'am . . . er . . . thank you. I'll be plumb happy to come." He looked at her for a long moment, then turned and walked out.

Bob turned to the girl. "Look here," he said, "you can't do that. I mean, asking a fellow like that up to the house."

"And why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Bob. "Good lord,

you know the sort he is! I told you what happened down at the Buffalo's Head. He's a fighter, a gambler, a rummy! Anyway," he added in brotherly tones, "he's not the type for you to be running around with."

Pat was thoughtful for a moment. "Do you never play poker, Bob?" she asked. "Nor take a drink?"

"Never mind about that," argued Bob stubbornly. "There's something about Pearson that isn't right."

The girl laughed. "You're so funny, Bob! My interest in Mr. Pearson is quite impersonal. I want more color for my next book. I think he can give it to me. In fact," she finished teasingly, "I think I'll put him in the book."

Bob gave a sour grunt. "Putting him in jail would be a better place. That's where he'll probably finish up."

"And men," laughed the girl, "say that women are cats!"

BUT Del Pearson came up for dinner, and though Bob was wary, he found nothing about the man to criticize. Pearson spoke seldom, and when he did it was in a soft, pleasing drawl that Bob had not particularly noticed before. But, Bob told himself, he wasn't fooled. What he saw now was a veneer, a camouflage for something hard and dangerous. The real Del Pearson was the man at the poker table last night, the man who had killed a quart of liquor, the man who had dropped two hundred dollars without the flicker of an eye, and who, at length, had beaten Dutchy Schmidt to a pulp and laughed as he did it.

When Pearson left, Bob tried to tell Pat all this. But his only reward was an impish smile and the promise that before she ran off with the man, she'd let Bob know.

But that was not the end of it. Del Pearson became a steady visitor. He and Pat went riding together, and a couple of

times Pearson took her to a dance. Bob argued with the girl, reasoned with her, and finally lost his temper.

"Either you drop this feller cold, or you can hit back for the city. I'm not," declared Bob, "having my sister's name hooked up with a tramp like him."

The girl's answer was equally heated. "Then I'll go back to the city. Tomorrow—after Del has gone."

Bob wasn't expecting a retort like that, but it told him one thing—Del Pearson was at last pulling out for his trapping grounds.

Bob looked up sharply. "Does he say he's going?"

"Yes, he does." And with acid sweetness, the girl remarked, "And you *will* be happy then!"

Her brother looked uncomfortable. "Dunno about happy," he told her. "But it'll be best for you."

He got up, still feeling awkward, and entered the store. He was there, arranging his shelves when a rider pulled up in front. Bob recognized Sheriff Bill Hunt.

The sheriff, from the county seat at Idaho Falls, clumped into the store, wiped the sweat from his face and asked Bob how were things.

"Oh, so-so," answered Bob. "And how's crime?"

Hunt grinned broadly. "Well, it ain't bringin' my gray hairs down in sorrer to the grave. Fact is, Bob, things is so

quiet I'm ashamed to take the pay for the job." He dragged himself up to a seat on the counter and rolled a cigarette. "Nothin' happenin' around here to keep a feller awake at night?"

"Not a thing," admitted Bob. "And there won't be any business, gun-fights, or much amusement of any kind till the fall work is finished up."

Hunt and Britton were deep in conversation when Del Pearson walked in suddenly. He nodded, flicked a glance at the star pinned to Hunt's shirt, then crossed over to the counter behind which Bob was standing.

"Sack of Bull, Bob. And some matches."

Bob filled his order, and Pearson left.

"Who's your friend?" the sheriff asked.

"Name's Pearson," answered Bob.

"Blew in here a few days ago, looking for a trapping district."

"Trappin' district?" echoed the sheriff. "He don't look like no trapper to me."

"Nor to me. But if a cow-puncher wants to trap in the winter, the law can't stop him."

After a moment Hunt spoke again. "Pearson, you say his name is? Where's he from?"

"Arizona."

The sheriff gave a grunt, then pulled out a dog-eared notebook, licked a thumb and began to turn the pages.

"Just a habit of mine, Bob," he explained. "I get word of men wanted for

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the

invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 182, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 182, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

different crimes. Can't pack the notices around with me, so I jot down the main facts." The sheriff thumbed over a few more pages. "Ain't no 'Pearson' listed here; and the only Arizonar wanted is a gent named Charlie Rae."

"Who," asked Bob, "is Charlie Rae?"

"A forger. At least," said the sheriff, "he's a forger to the extent of forgin' a bill of sale for a bunch of cattle he disposed of over in southern Montana. This Charlie Rae," he went on, referring to the notebook, "is a ringer for Pearson—six foot tall, dark, twenty-seven years old and quite decent-lookin'. Come to think of it, I've got his picture filed away in the office. Can't remember much of the picture, but the measurements and description of Charlie Rae sure fit this trappin' cow-nurse."

"Pictures of reward notices aren't much to go by," pointed out Bob. "And anyone can draw up a bill of sale."

"Sure," agreed the sheriff, grimly. "But there's a joker in this one. A photographed copy of it come along with the reward notice; and if I can locate a gent whose handwritin' compares sorta favorable with that on the bill of sale, I'll know what to do." He closed the notebook. "Must have a talk with the boy."

Bob laughed uneasily.

"Do you collect signatures or hand-writing from every stranger you meet?"

"No," agreed the sheriff. "But I'll appreciate collectin' his." He stood up, nudged the gun-belt around his thick middle and allowed he'd get him a cup of coffee first.

"You needn't go far to find one," suggested Bob. "Pat's home again, and her coffee's famous."

Sheriff Hunt grinned. "If that's a bid, I'm callin' you. Anyways, I ain't seen Pat for a coon's age."

Bob led the way to his living quarters—and then wished he hadn't. Del Pearson was there with Pat!

Hunt gave Pearson a nod, and shook hands cordially with the girl.

"Purtier'n ever," he said gallantly, "though you ain't growed an inch. But you know what they say—'good things come in little packets'!"

He turned to Del Pearson, and it was evident he was seeking a formal introduction. Bob furnished it, and the sheriff's manner became more serious.

"Pearson," he repeated. "From around here?"

"No," answered the man, coolly. "From off your range."

It was a slap at the sheriff, and he felt it. He looked at Pearson with blunt directness.

"If I seem sort of noseey," he said slowly, "you needn't mind. Fact is, there's bin trouble hereabouts, and I got orders to check on every stranger I meet. *Every* stranger," he reiterated. "So I'm only treatin' you like I treat everyone else."

Pearson's eyes seemed to harden, but he nodded, "Go ahead."

Hunt pulled out his book, and took a seat at the table. He asked Pearson his age, full name, where he was from and where he was heading. When he had it all down in writing, he pushed pencil and notebook toward Pearson. "All right, sign here."

Pearson stiffened. "Sign what?"

"These particulars."

"And suppose I don't?"

Sheriff Hunt measured him narrowly. "And why won't you?"

"Because I don't have to," Pearson told him bluntly. "Ain't that reason enough?"

A moment of tense quiet came. Bob looked from one man to the other. He looked at Pat, standing beside Pearson. The girl was breathing hard, a frightened expression on her face. So far as Bob could see, Sheriff Hunt had set a trap for Del Pearson, and Pearson was backing neatly out of it.

"U-huh," said the sheriff, at last.

"Smart feller. Know your rights and goin' to stick by 'em."

"Why not?" rapped Pearson.

"Nothin', perhaps," was the officer's dry comment. "But up in this country, it's the custom for honest men to sign any statement they give to the law. If you won't, well . . ." and he shrugged meaningly ". . . perhaps you know *why* you won't."

For a second Del Pearson's eyes held a dangerous light. But he fought his temper and finally nodded.

"Let her go at that," he clipped. "And if that's all, I've something else to do." Taking Pat under the arm, he walked with her from the room.

"Obliging sort," Bob murmured, breaking a long silence. "And as you said, a smart feller with it."

Hunt, red-faced and outplayed, ignored the pleasantry. "Del Pearson," he muttered, "a name I won't forget."

WHEN Bob went in for his supper that evening, the kitchen was deserted, and the stove cold. There had been no preparations for the meal. He thought immediately of Del Pearson, Hunt's cross-examination and Pat's absence. Then he smiled at the idea. Pat was probably off visiting friends in town, and had decided to stay the evening.

But his uneasiness increased through his bachelor meal. Then he found Pat's riding coat and horse missing.

Alarmed, he threw saddle on his paint horse and rode down to the Buffalo's Head. There he learned that Del Pearson and Bill Wade, a cowpuncher from the Sawtooth foothills, had pulled out late in the afternoon, and that as Pearson had packed all his belongings on the mare, he was not expected to return. Bob wanted to ask if Pat had been with the men, but as he had no desire to start a scandal, he went out, swung into the saddle and headed toward the Sawtooth hills.

Britton's face was hard in the gathering dusk. He had no assurance that Pat was in town, but neither was he certain she had gone off with Pearson. He remembered her words—that if she "ran off" with the man, she would tell him about it first. But that was some days ago, and in the meantime Bob had seen the girl and Pearson together too often. The signs showed Pat to be deeply in love with the man. If he needed confirmation, he had only to recall the frightened expression on her face when Pearson had faced Sheriff Hunt.

Now, Pearson had pulled up stakes—and Pat, too, was gone.

Bob pushed the paint horse into an easy gallop, wondering how long it would take to catch Pearson.

THE night was chilly, and the red of the sunset had given way to an amber after-glow. Here and there, across the prairie, lights began to gleam in scattered ranchhouses, and Bob wondered how Pat was faring, clad only in that thin coat of hers. He ground his teeth, and asked himself what had got into the girl.

It was that romantic nature of hers, he thought. That curious streak that, even as a child, prompted her to sit out in the sunset, chin in hand, and watch the purple shadows creep up over the hills. The same streak that made her pour out her heart in that mushy book she wrote. And it was that same romantic urge that made her give everything to the mysterious Del Pearson.

Well, this was to be the end of it, swore Bob. When he overtook her—and he most certainly would—he'd take her back to Soda Flats and ship her back to the city. Romance might not flourish so well in the brick-walled canyons. At least, Del Pearson wouldn't be there.

And then he saw her riding toward him, silhouetted against the amber sky.

He waited till she came alongside.

"Where in thunder have you been to?"

"I've . . . I've been seeing Del away."

"Del, away?" growled Bob. "Where's he heading? I told him—"

"He's going up into the Sawtooths. Bill Wade said it's good trapping."

Bob grunted. "A swell place for him. Only other man in there is Pete Moore. And if your fighting Arizonan wants trouble, Pete Moore'll probably oblige."

"But Pete Moore's away."

"And if Pete gets the notion that Mister Pearson has been infringing on his preserves, the ensuing unpleasantness would be worth going in to see."

The girl was silent for a moment, then, somber-eyed, she looked intently at her brother. "Bob," she said, "why can't you say a good word about Del?"

Bob squirmed. "Because I don't know anything good about him to say. And now," he added, "I'll ask you one—why won't you hear *bad* about him?"

The answer came quietly: "Because I love him."

Here was Bob's big chance. He could pin her down now, tell her what she should be told, let her know he was sending her back to the city. His mouth opened—then shut tight. He looked at Pat for a long moment.

"All right, kid," he said. "Let's go home."

THE days passed. Fall work was completed, and Soda Flats became populous once again—and hectic. It was during this period that Bob took Pat to the city on a Christmas buying-trip. They were gone a month and when they returned Bob, for days, was busy unpacking and getting the stock into shape. In the meantime the snow had come.

At breakfast one morning, Bob noticed that the chill sun, shining in the windows, painted hollows in the girl's cheeks.

Bob frowned. "What's up, kid?" he asked. "Sick?"

She looked up quickly. "Why, no."

"Anything else wrong?"

"Of course not."

"You fretting over Del Pearson?"

"Why should I fret over him?"

"Why should a girl fret over any man?"

Britton's face was getting red. "When did you hear from him last?"

Pat's only reply, was a tremble of her scarlet lips.

"You mean," exclaimed Bob, "that you've never heard from him at all?"

"And suppose I haven't?" she retorted valiantly. "Perhaps he's been too busy. Maybe he hasn't had the chance to send out mail."

"Oh?" smiled Bob. "Didn't Pete Armstrong say he ran into him not so long ago? And that halfbreed, Jerry Mond—he says he saw him."

"He may have been sick since then. He may be hurt. . . ." And suddenly the girl got up and almost ran from the room.

Bob stirred his coffee. He wanted to go into Pat's room and talk this thing out with her—show her the folly of caring for a man of the Pearson stripe. Then he decided against it. The break had to come, so better now than in the future. It was tough, it was tragic; but Pat was young and she would get over it.

Curiously enough, another man came down from the north that day. He was a timber-cruiser who had passed through Del Pearson's trapping district. He bought a few things in the store, then, business disposed of, Bob spoke—

"Pete Moore was the only man trapping there last winter," Bob pointed out, "but I hear there are more in there this year. Feller named Pearson is one of 'em. Still on the job?"

"Oh, sure," the cruiser said. "And likin' it fine!" He grinned. "Dunno how his trappin's comin', but he's doin' all right with Marie Mond."

Bob frowned. He had heard that the halfbreed was trapping somewhere in

LAST-CHANCE TRAIL TO GLORY

the Sawtooths, but he was unaware he was near Del Pearson. Bob knew Marie Mond. She had attended school in Soda Flats. At nineteen, Marie was nice.

"So Pearson's doing all right with Marie?"

"Oh, sure," laughed the cruiser. "She's over at his place every night he's home."

Something creaked behind him. Bob turned, glimpsed the door connecting with his living-quarters closing quietly.

He found Pat face down on her bed, dark curls tumbled, shoulders heaving.

"Don't take it like that, kid," he told her. "Leave him to me."

But Pat would not be comforted. She poked around for her handkerchief, found none. Bob gave her his. At last she spoke through her tears.

"He wouldn't do that, Bob. He *couldn't* do that to me!"

"But he's done it!" Bob said. He took her in his arms.

"But I trusted him, Bob," she cried. "I believed him. When I said good-bye to him, because . . . because I couldn't say all I wanted to, I gave him my book for a keepsake. . . ."

That mushy book. "The Man I Love." Somehow it didn't seem so mushy now.

"Never mind, honey. He'll pay. I'll pound him to pulp the first chance I get."

But Bob was to learn that women are queer. She couldn't have thought anything of Del Pearson then, but she pleaded with Bob to leave him alone.

He argued and stormed. "Well," he sputtered, "what am I to do?"

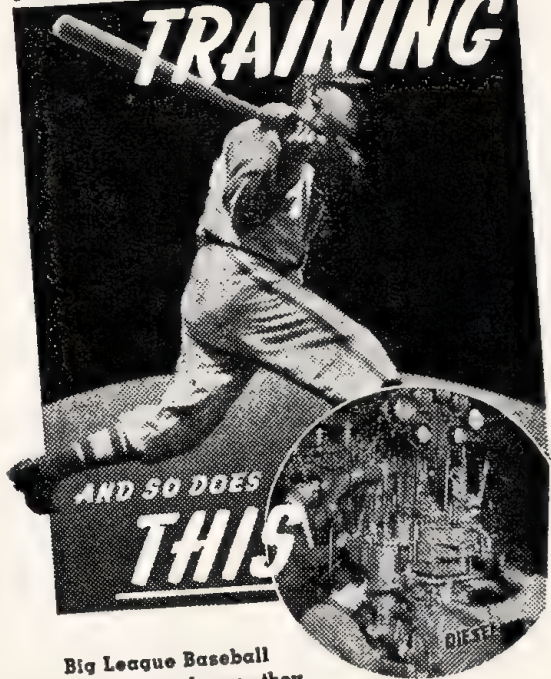
"Nothing, Bob. I'll go out on the stage tomorrow."

BUT that very afternoon—Del Pearson turned up.

He came into the store, leaving his hammer-headed gelding tethered to the hitching rail. Pat was not in the store.

Pearson, without a word, opened a sack he carried and shook out the loveliest

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30x4.50-21	2.40	1.07	\$2.35	30x4.50-21	2.95	1.25	34x5.00-20	3.45	1.45
30x4.75-19	2.45	1.26	\$2.35	30x5.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x5.50-20	3.45	1.45
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28x5.25-18	2.60	1.07	\$2.35	30x7.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x8.00-20	3.45	1.45
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28x7.00-18	2.95	1.07	\$2.35	30x31.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x31.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.00-19	2.95	1.07	\$2.35	30x31.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x32.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.00-20	2.95	1.07	\$2.35	30x32.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x32.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.00-21	2.95	1.07	\$2.35	30x32.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x33.00-20	3.45	1.45
30x7.00-20	2.95	1.07	\$2.35	30x33.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x33.50-20	3.45	1.45
30x7.00-21	2.95	1.07	\$2.35	30x33.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x34.00-20	3.45	1.45
30x7.25-17	3.00	1.07	\$2.35	30x34.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x34.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.25-18	3.00	1.07	\$2.35	30x34.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x35.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.25-19	3.00	1.07	\$2.35	30x35.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x35.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.25-20	3.00	1.07	\$2.35	30x35.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x36.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.25-21	3.00	1.07	\$2.35	30x36.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x36.50-20	3.45	1.45
30x7.25-20	3.00	1.07	\$2.35	30x36.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x37.00-20	3.45	1.45
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28x7.50-20	3.05	1.07	\$2.35	30x39.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x39.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x7.50-21	3.05	1.07	\$2.35	30x39.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x40.00-20	3.45	1.45
30x7.50-20	3.05	1.07	\$2.35	30x40.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x40.50-20	3.45	1.45
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30x8.00-17	3.15	1.07	\$2.35	30x44.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x45.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.00-18	3.15	1.07	\$2.35	30x45.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x45.50-20	3.45	1.45
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30x8.00-21	3.15	1.07	\$2.35	30x47.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x48.00-20	3.45	1.45
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28x8.25-18	3.20	1.07	\$2.35	30x48.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x49.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.25-19	3.20	1.07	\$2.35	30x49.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x49.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.25-20	3.20	1.07	\$2.35	30x49.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x50.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.25-21	3.20	1.07	\$2.35	30x50.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x50.50-20	3.45	1.45
30x8.25-20	3.20	1.07	\$2.35	30x50.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x51.00-20	3.45	1.45
30x8.25-21	3.20	1.07	\$2.35	30x51.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x51.50-20	3.45	1.45
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30x8.50-20	3.25	1.07	\$2.35	30x54.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x54.50-20	3.45	1.45
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30x8.75-17	3.30	1.07	\$2.35	30x55.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x55.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.75-18	3.30	1.07	\$2.35	30x55.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x56.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.75-19	3.30	1.07	\$2.35	30x56.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x56.50-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.75-20	3.30	1.07	\$2.35	30x56.50-20	2.95	1.25	34x57.00-20	3.45	1.45
28x8.75-21	3.30	1.07	\$2.35	30x57.00-20	2.95	1.25	34x57.50-20	3.45	1.45

son to be the same. Then Pearson swung a backhand blow that sent Bob sprawling.

"I'll handle this!" he rapped. And to the drink-crazed Pete Moore, "Moore, look at me!"

Pat tripped and fell, got up and started to run again. Bob grabbed her.

The shooting had ceased. In the dead silence, Pearson was walking toward Pete Moore, slowly, snarling, "Don't you move! Don't you move Moore!"

Moore, puzzled, numbed with fear, or perhaps controlled by a stronger will than his own, stood with the gun in his fingers and watched Pearson's advance.

Pearson called again to Moore—only this time he called him Bailey.

"Don't move, Bailey, or *I'll kill you!*"

Pearson was within six feet of Moore, when the gunman suddenly wheeled, and began to run, Pearson after him. Bob came to life, and other men boiled out of saloons and stores. Suddenly Moore turned and fired.

Del stopped, staggered—then he sprang and wrapped his arms about Pete Moore. The six-gun roared again—and again!

Ten men overpowered Moore, hauled him into the Buffalo's Head, and roped him. Bob went out to see to Del Pearson.

He was lying face down in the middle of the street and a red blot was forming in the snow. Other men came, and they carried him up to Bob Britton's store.

One bullet had passed through his side, just below the lungs; another had gouged an ugly wound across his skull. After old Doc Walters had probed and grunted and done all that was humanly possible, they left the rest to God.

FOR three days Del hovered on the borderline. Doc Walters called regularly, but the nursing was left to Pat.

Del Pearson, Bob thought, had undoubtedly saved Pat's life in that critical moment with Pete Moore. But that didn't square him for the manner in which he had treated her. Bob thought of Marie

Mond; thought of Pat, looking for the letters that never came. But as he looked at Pat herself, sitting there hour after hour beside the bed, Bob wondered a lot and marvelled. He knew what Pat was feeling in her heart.

Then Sheriff Hunt rode into the picture.

He entered the house, pulled icicles from his straggling mustache and removed his cap. He squinted into the other room, where Del Pearson lay unmoving, raised an eye at Bob and shook his head.

"Three days of it now," said Bob. "Don't look good."

Pat came out, carrying a cup of water. The sheriff touched her on the arm.

"You'd better hear this, Pat. Mebbe it'll help." He looked at Bob, and went on. "The last time I was here, I grilled the boy pretty thorough. I figured he was a wanted, and acted accordin'ly. But when I got home, there was a letter waitin' for me. Yeah! Seems like this Pearson had a brother who was workin' for the Cattlemen's Association down in Arizona, and he got dry-gulched by this feller Moore—though Moore's proper name is Bailey. Moore lit out, and this Del Pearson got himself appointed as a temp'ry successor to his brother. He trailed him up here, heard he was located some place around, and when he found he was trappin' in the Sawtooths, I guess he went in there after him."

Bob heard the sheriff's story in dead silence. Then he added his.

"But Pete Moore was out on a holiday and due to come in—like he did—around Christmas. I suppose that's why Pearson came to town, hopin' to meet him."

"Yeah," nodded the sheriff soberly. "And it looks like he did."

The girl spoke up. "You are sure of this, Sheriff?" And when the lawman nodded, she said, "Oh, I'm so glad!"

"So now," went on Sheriff Hunt, "I'll collect Pete till he snaps out of his jag, then get in touch with the authorities."

In the sick-room, Del Pearson stirred, then muttered a few inaudible words.

"Gosh!" gritted Bob. "If only he'd played the game all the way—I mean about Marie, and your letters. . . ."

But the girl silenced him suddenly. "Shh! He's coming around!"

Del opened his eyes, closed them and drifted again to unconsciousness.

Pat dropped into a chair beside the bed and wetted the dry lips. Ten minutes passed, and once again Del roused.

It was only for a second or so, but he found Pat beside him. He put out a groping hand for hers, and she gave it to him. There was another long vigil, and he became fully conscious.

He looked up at Pat, smiled. And then, as though some remembrance had come to him, he turned his head to the wall. The two men stood silently by, but they heard him speak in a muffled, strained tone.

"Bob said . . . said something about that girl. About Marie. You don't believe it, do you, Pat?"

Pat's voice was soft. "Believe what?"

"Anything. I guess it looked bad. But I can explain." He was staring up at Pat now, deep entreaty in his eyes. "I never thought it'd look bad . . . till Bob put it that way. And when I explain, you'll hate me . . . worse'n ever."

"Then don't tell me," begged Pat. "Go to sleep. You'll tire yourself."

"But I've *got* to tell you!" Del winced. "It's about your letters . . . I brought them all back."

Pat was frowning in puzzlement. She shot her brother and the sheriff a wondering look, turned to Del Pearson again.

"You brought them back? Why didn't you answer them?"

Pearson wetted his lips. "I couldn't. I couldn't even read 'em." He seemed to hurdle the last words. "I've never had a day's schoolin' in my life."

Strangely, Bob's heart began to pound. Pat's breast rose and fell, but Pearson was going mercilessly on with his confession.

"That's why I couldn't sign that statement for the sheriff. I know it looked bad. . . ."

Pat tried to stem the flow of words. "Shhh! Some other time."

He persisted in a voice that was weakening. "I got to tell you! About that book of yours you gave me. I almost told you then. A book wasn't any use to me. I wouldn't know which way to hold it. And then I was scared to tell you. You were educated . . . you could write . . . you'd look down on me. . . ."

"*Del!*" Pat's choky voice broke in. "Please, no more!"

"And Marie . . . I thought if I paid her to teach me to read 'n write this Winter . . . well, I'd do most anything to keep from losing you. . . ."

Pat was on her knees beside the bed, clinging to his hand, sobbing.

"Del, dear. Please! It *hurts!*"

The sheriff grabbed Bob by the arm and hurried him out of the room. Bob closed the door, and in the kitchen the sheriff produced his gaudy handkerchief and blew his nose noisily. Bob grinned at him.

"Hay fever?"

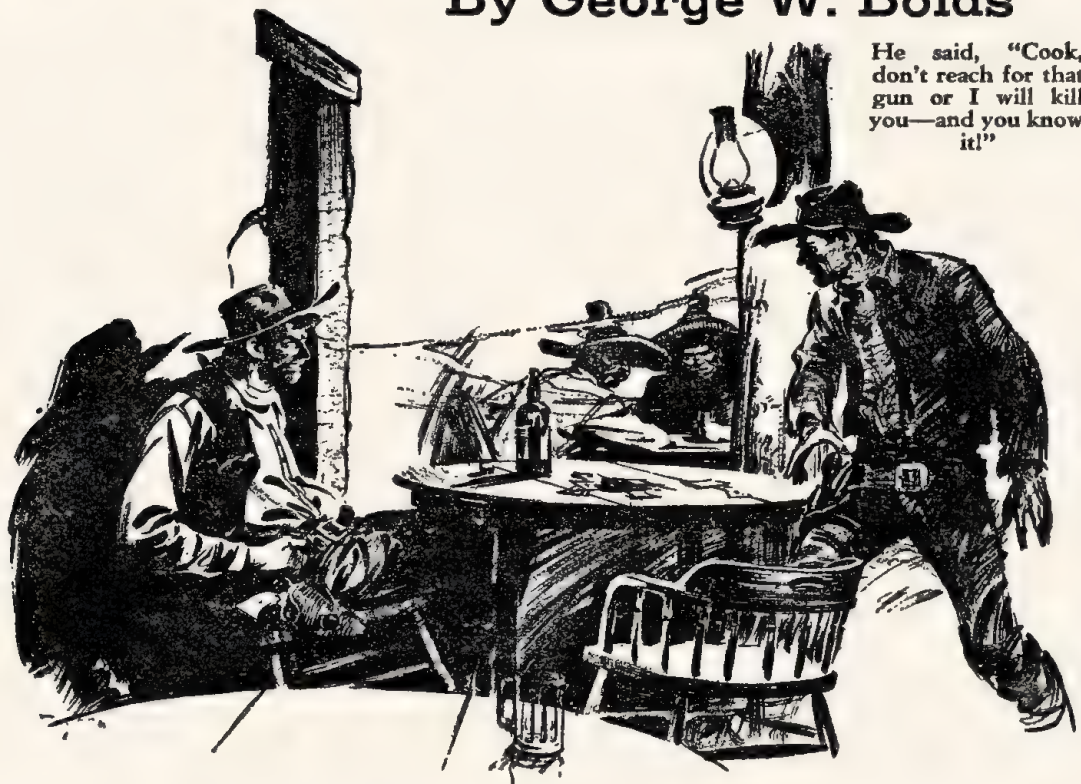
"Must be," said the sheriff. "Or some-p'n danged like it. Anyway, I'm glad I was able to square the young feller off."

"And *I've* some squaring to do," admitted Bob. "Like you, I thought there was something not right about Del. In fact, I was sure of it. So sure of it, that I told Pat if she didn't stop running around with him, I'd put a stop to it."

"You did, eh?" grinned the sheriff. "And quite a man's-size chore you took on." He indicated the closed door with a motion of his thumb. "So if you think you're man enough, go right ahead. Try puttin' a stop to that!"

Dodge City Peacemaker

By George W. Bolds



He said, "Cook, don't reach for that gun or I will kill you—and you know it!"

Against the wanton slayers who made pest-holes of the cattle towns, came marshals who killed suddenly, but always with the knowledge that the law was right In this true story, an older who knew Ed Masterson, tells a short, heroic chapter in the life — and death — of a lawman who always gave the other fellow a chance

MARSHALS who vowed to enforce the law in the towns that sprang from the prolific womb of the Old West, were faced, if they lived long enough, with almost insurmountable obstacles. History will never forget that these men were the trail-blazers of the empire west of the Mississippi.

Bill Tilghman, Wyatt Earp, Bat and Ed Masterson—men who knew no fear, battled lawlessness in those terrible days, and won, because they knew they were right and because their courage was greater than those who killed wantonly.

Each possessed characteristics that

stood out in letters of fire. The cold and deadly fury of Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp was a vivid contrast to the quiet efficiency of Bill Tilghman and Ed Masterson. The latter pair never failed to give an outlaw a chance to surrender before killing him.

Bat and Wyatt would shoot a bad actor and investigate afterwards. But they knew they were right and the law was with them before they fired.

Bat and his brother, Ed, were real opposites. Bat, always up and doing things, saw his name on the front pages time and time again. He had the nerve, when life

was at stake, to buck unbelievable odds.

Once in Wichita, Bat was dancing with a girl. Suddenly she suggested they stop, as King was in town and he might make trouble. Earp, too, told Bat to lay off the girl, as she was considered King's private property.

"Who the hell is this fellow, King?" Bat asked Wyatt.

Wyatt told him King was a sergeant with troops camped nearby. The sergeant, Wyatt added, was a bad one.

Just then, King, accompanied by several soldiers, entered the dance hall. When he saw his girl in the arms of another man, he drew his gun, shot the girl to death and then plugged Bat in the leg.

As Bat went down, he drew and killed King. The quick-thinking Earp and Ben Thompson got Bat out before he could be murdered by King's comrades.

BAT was sheriff at Dodge when Bob Wright and others wanted Ed Masterson to take the job of city marshal. When Bat heard about this he told Bob that Ed was not fit for the job. Ed, however, accepted the marshalship, regardless of his brother.

Dodge City, at that time, was at its worst. Great herds of cattle, arriving for shipment, brought with them gun-fighters, gamblers, thieves, rustlers and other riff-raff.

Bat wanted Ed to resign, so he told Wright, Cox, McCarthy and the others that Ed was too soft-hearted to be efficient. Instead of shooting a man who deserved it, Bat told them, Ed would stop and gab with him. Some skunk, Bat thought, would shoot out his brother's lights before he had been in office a year.

Not long after Ed accepted the badge, a Texas killer from the Jones and Plummer trail herd, started to shoot up a dance hall. Ed ordered him to be quiet. The killer shot Ed in the shoulder—and Ed killed him.

When Bat heard what had happened he suggested Ed go back to school.

"Why did you enter into a conversation with this outlaw?" Bat demanded.

"He looked like a decent sort," said Ed. "I thought if I explained to him that he couldn't pull that rough stuff here, he would leave peacefully."

"Explain, nothing!" Bat roared. "What is the use of picking up a snake to see if he has rattles on his tail?"

For awhile Ed took Bat's advice. All the same, he disapproved of killing a person who might be saved. Ed had just as much iron nerve as Bat—if not a little more.

Ben Daniels, one of Ed's deputies, killed a gambler on the South Side, and Jim Cook, the gambler's partner, sent word to the marshal's office that he would kill the first lawman he saw.

Bat heard about it and told Ed to resign.

"No," drawled Ed, "I'm going down and arrest Cook."

Word came that Cook was sitting at a table in his gambling house, a gun near his hand.

"I am going after him, now," Ed said to Deputy Daniels.

"I'm going along, too," the deputy replied.

"You stay here. I don't need any help," Ed told him. Then he went out.

Ed Masterson stepped through the door of Cook's place and said, "Cook, don't reach for that gun or I will kill you—and you know it!"

Cook froze when he saw Ed. He had no idea Ed would come into his own place to get him.

"I give up," Cook said.

Ed looked at Cook and said, "I am not going to jail you, or arrest Daniels for killing that thief of a partner of yours. . . . But," he continued, "the first complaint that comes against this dive, I am going after you—and don't forget it!"

DODGE CITY PEACEMAKER

THERE was a rack in Bob Wright's store where Ed made the cowboys deposit their guns when they got too drunk and boisterous. Sometimes as many as fifty guns were in the rack. The boys couldn't get them unless sober, or on their way back home. The scheme worked pretty well, too.

Things in Dodge City went along fine for a year. Ed and his deputies had things under complete control. Then two cowboys named Wagoner and Walker came to town with a shipment. Wagoner roped a fiddler in a South Side dance hall and dragged him, kicking, into the street as hundreds watched.

Ed moved to arrest the puncher and Wagoner pulled his gun. Instead of shooting Wagoner, as he should have done, Ed tried to take his gun away. While they struggled over it, Walker came out and pulled his gun to shoot Ed. Just then Bat came around a corner, saw what was happening and fired. Walker, shot through the heart, never knew what hit him.

Bat did not dare shoot at Wagoner for fear of hitting Ed. He started forward, but before he reached the wrestling men, Wagoner, with a quick wrench, got the gun against Ed's side and pulled the trigger. Ed fell dead.

Bat shot Wagoner.

Ed, slain marshal of Dodge City, lacked neither physical courage nor skill with the sixgun. But he did lack another quality—a quality greatly conducive to old age in a peace officer on the wild frontier. He tried to reason too long with men intent upon killing.

The death of Ed Masterson shocked the town. Civic organizations passed resolutions of respect. During the funeral, the largest ever held in Dodge, all business houses were closed.

The Dodge City Times said, "It was the greatest demonstration of respect that had ever been shown a citizen."

But it didn't help Ed much.

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(Continued from page 84)

way to save Brettler. But the gent who'd been left to guard him wasn't taking any chances. He kept his gun in his hand.

Gradually, in the semi-darkness, Curt let his right hand reach out and close over a rock. He clutched it firmly, finally moved it closer to him. The minutes dragged. The night was still. Curt moved his legs as though they were cramped.

"If I get up and stretch my legs don't shoot me," he said. "They're goin' to sleep on me."

"It won't take much to make me shoot yuh," the fellow said. "So be careful not to make any sudden moves. I'd hate to kill yuh before we get the rest o' that gold. We *can* take it to Mexico, yuh know."

"Sure," said Curt. "I'll be careful."

He rose slowly to his feet. The big rock in his hand came with him. He turned sidewise so the gent with the gun couldn't see it. He stomped his feet as though trying to renew circulation in his legs. He swung his arms across his body. He did it again, and this time he let the rock fly.

It hit the fellow in the stomach, and the air went out of him in one great *whoosh*. His gun went off, but the bullet missed Curt.

Curt leaped forward as the fellow collapsed, doubled up in agony, trying to get his breath. Curt landed on him like a cat. His fist smashed against the fellow's jaw. His other hand wrenched the gun from the jasper's grasp. The masked gent tried to get up, but Curt lammed him on the head with the gun barrel, and he relaxed.

BREATHING heavily, Curt stared at him for a moment, reached down and stripped the mask off his face. It was Dutch Garr!

Curt leaped into the saddle, and raced toward town, clutching Garr's gun in his hand. He prayed he'd be in time to save old Louie Brettler's life, and that Louie could tell who had given him the gold

pieces. That would prove Curt Healey wasn't a stage robber and a killer.

Curt raked the horse cruelly. The two ahead of him had an hour's start. But they'd wait their chance to kill Louie. They wouldn't make it a public murder.

The wind tore at Curt as he raced along. The thunder of his horse's hoofs was loud in his ears. His straining eyes searched for the lights of Pimas City. Then they were there, finally—tiny, flickering dots of gold in the darkness. He slowed his mad pace. If he were seen he would be shot. A reward was on his own head. Whether he was dead or alive, it wouldn't be lifted until Louie Brettler talked!

Curt approached town cautiously. He knew it was not so late, for lights were in most of the houses. The gents had kidnapped him right after dark. The killers would wait until Louie was alone in his store before they shot him.

Dismounting in the darkness of an alleyway across from Brettler's, Curt led his horse between two buildings, then stopped, staring.

Across the street, Gail Trent was just mounting the steps to the store. Down the boardwalk three punchers were singing as they came through the batwing doors of Dirk Zeida's saloon. Gail Trent pushed open Brettler's door and Healey saw her walk to where the counter ran the length of the room.

She stopped suddenly.

A shot, then a scream, rent the air. A dim form flitted past Curt's view inside the store. Then Gail was gone! Curt was racing across the street, his gun in his hand. Somebody, down the street, yelled.

"Curt Healey! He's got a gun!"

Curt was inside. The drawer which Louie used as a cash box lay on the floor. Money was on the floor. So was old Louie. A bloody spot showed on his shirt front and his eyes were open—but he was dead! Yells and the sound of boots came from the street. Curt ran toward the rear of

the store, a cold fear clutching him as he barged through the back doors and out into the darkness of the alley.

"Gail!" he called.

But there was no answer.

The confusion inside the store grew. Voices! Curses! Curt Healey's name sounded loud, linked with profanity.

"He run in the store with a gun in his hand," somebody said.

Curt pressed back into the darkness, moved swiftly down the alley to where he could safely cross to his horse. All the time one horrible thought was hammering at his brain. Gail! They had her! She'd barged in on a murder! She had seen who killed Louie Brettler! The killers had taken her away!

CHAPTER THREE

One Chance for the Damned!

AMID the turmoil and hubbub that boiled up in Pimas City, Curt ran down to the edge of town. He crossed the street in the darkness, found his horse and rode madly in a circle, trying to locate a rider carrying Gail Trent away.

Out on the desert he stopped, but heard nothing except the noise of the town, a mixture of yells, dogs barking, the rap of bootheels on boardwalks. There was no pound of hoofs in the sand of the desert, no rider streaking away toward the hills through moon-silvered night. Then Curt rode again, circling, knowing that whoever had dragged Gail Trent out of Louie Brettler's back door was still in town. The girl was in Pimas City. And the murderer was there.

Eluding a posse seeking Louie's killer, Curt made his way back to Pimas City. Stealthily, he entered Gail Trent's house, searched it. It was late. If she wasn't hidden somewhere she would be here. But she was gone!

Bleak-faced, purposeful, Curt went up

the alley in the darkness to where he could peer into Dirk Zeida's saloon.

Dutch Garr was talking to Dirk. Zeida, dark-faced, fingering the heavy gold chain that ran across the front of his fancy vest, was leading Dutch toward his office. Behind the pair came Charley Ott. They, Curt was positive, were three of the four bandits.

The men entered Dirk's private room. Curt eased his way down to the alley door to the saloon and waited. He wanted either Dutch or Dirk or Charley Ott. Any one of them would be able to tell him where Gail Trent was.

Through the open door that led into the hallway he could hear their faint voices. He could see Dutch and Dirk very clearly.

"An' I couldn't help it, boss," Dutch Garr was saying to Dirk Zeida. "He had a rock in his hand. I didn't see it. It hit me in the belly."

The noise of the saloon drowned their voices. Grim, silent, a dim shadow in the night, Curt waited. Now he could be patient. He had something to work on. One of those men could tell him about Gail. Finally Garr and Charley Ott left the office and went into the saloon. Curt moved forward, gun in hand. He stepped through the hall, stopped in the doorway and looked at Dirk Zeida with cold, hard eyes.

"Come with me, Dirk," he said softly.

Dirk Zeida's face went pallid suddenly. He stared at Curt Healey's stony face, then at the gun pointed at his belly. He rose and moved out into the hall. Curt pulled Dirk's gun from its holster as he passed him, prodded him toward the back door. In the alley he thrust the gun against his back.

"We'll go out to where you took me," he told the gambler.

"You're makin' a mistake, Curt," said Zeida complainingly. "I don't know what this is all about."

Curt laughed, a cold, harsh sound.

"Be still," he said, his voice bleak. "I heard Garr tell you about me getting away from him. He'd only tell that to somebody that was with him out there in the hills when I got hell beat outa me!"

DIRK ZEIDA was very quiet after that. He said nothing as they rode slowly through the darkness. He made no sound when Curt pushed the horse into the brush as a posse approached through the moon-shadowed desert. His face glinted white and wet with sweat as he turned once to look at the stony-hard face of Curt Healey behind him.

Curt laughed as the posse passed and they rode on.

"It's different when the tables are turned," he said meaningly. "This time you'll talk, Dirk!"

Dirk Zeida made no reply. They rode on into the hills, stopped where the three masked men had brought Curt before. Dirk Zeida slid down off the horse. He looked different as he turned to face Curt Healey. His thick lips held a sneer.

"I've been thinkin'," he said boldly. "And to hell with you. It's me that has you in a spot, not you that has me in one. I've got your girl! But I'm the only one that knows where she is! Dutch Garr and Charley Ott don't know. Nobody knows but me. What'll happen to her if I get bumped off? Think of that, Healey!"

Curt Healey said nothing. His granite-like face grew a little more bleak. His gun was steady. His voice was chill and cold and convincing.

"There's one time I'll kill you, Dirk," he said steadily. "And that's when I realize that there's no hope of getting Gail Trent back. She's more to me than anything. If I ever learn that you've harmed her you're as good as dead, Dirk. You and Ott and Garr, all of you. I'll kill you all, if it's the last thing I do on earth!"

"There's no need to kill anybody," said

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Dirk Zeida. "We'll make a dicker. I'll trade the girl for the gold!"

Zeida peered anxiously at Curt. He waited. Curt stood there for a minute, trying to tell himself that he had no right to trade something that wasn't his, even for anybody's life. But it was no use. He'd do anything on earth to get Gail Trent out of the hands of these murderers.

"It's a deal," he said. "Bring the girl to the flat mesa up on top of Sugar Loaf Hill. I'll be there. When you give her to me I'll tell you where the gold is. You can leave one man to guard us and go get it. I'll play square with you."

Dirk Zeida grinned. Curt motioned with his gun.

"Walk back to town, Zeida," Curt told the gambler. "You can make it in a couple hours. I'll be near Sugar Loaf Hill all day tomorrow."

Zeida's white teeth flashed as he smiled. He started away, and Curt watched him till he was out of sight, his boots scuffling noisily among the rocks. Then the night was still.

The quiet seemed to press down on Curt Healey. Vaguely he wondered if, after all, he would be the thief they accused him of being if he traded the location of the gold for Gail Trent's liberty.

In the stillness a vague, stealthy sound came to Curt. He started to turn his head. A cold voice froze him, chilled him, made him a motionless statue.

"Put up your hands, Curt! There's a gun trained on your backbone!"

SLOWLY, Curt raised his hands. Into his vision a dark figure moved slowly—young Jimmy Stevens, old Buff's kid. His shoulders were bowed in a tired stoop. But the gun in his hand was steady, glinting wickedly.

"Got yuh!" he breathed, a world of satisfaction in his voice. "Got yuh! I swore and be damned I'd do it! I swore I'd nev-

(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 103)

er stop till I tracked yuh down, Curt!"

"I didn't kill Buff, Jimmy," Curt said softly.

Young Jimmy Stevens laughed coldly, his voice a cackle.

"It's hard not to kill yuh now," he said.

"It's hard not to pull the trigger and blast yuh to hell! But I won't. I'll take yuh in. I'll let the law put a noose around your neck. Get on your horse and ride slow across the hills to where me and pop had our horse ranch, Curt. I'll tie you up there. Then I'll take yuh in."

Slowly, Curt climbed up into his saddle, rode ahead of the youngster. At the door of the little shack where old Buff had lived with Jimmy, he stopped. A lamp burned inside the shack, and by its yellow glow the whiteness of Jimmy's face was accentuated. Curt saw the bright flare of hate in the eyes.

"Go inside," the kid said.

Curt did.

The kid backed around behind him.

"Sit down on a stool and put your hands behind yuh, Curt," he said. "I'm tyin' yuh up good and tight, so yuh can't try any funny tricks on the way into town."

"I didn't kill Buff, kid," Curt repeated.

"Come around here in front of me and look at me, Jimmy. Don't go off half-cocked. Tell me if I look like a man that would kill his best friend over money. Start your head working, Jimmy. Figure it out. If I killed Buff to steal the gold why haven't I quit the country? Why haven't I run away? What am I hanging around here for? Think about that, kid."

It was very quiet in the shack. The sound of the kid's boots seemed extra loud as he stepped very slowly around in front of Curt Healey, probing at him with his fire-filled eyes. His young face was very white and the lines curving downward about his tight-pressed lips seemed black, ugly. The knuckles on the hand that gripped the gun were white with tension.

"You tell me," he said. "Why didn't you run away?"

"Because I hadn't done anything to run away from, kid," Curt told him soothingly. "Four masked men stopped the stage. One of them shot Buff. I tossed one box of gold down and it busted open. They started to pick it up and I made a break for it. I got behind a hill and took the gold out of the stage and hid it. While I was gone the stage team got scared and ran away. The coach was turned over. I stayed hid because I didn't want the bandits to find me, to try to make me tell where I'd put the money.

"Old Buff tried to tell folks that, kid. He said I *took* the gold, not that I stole it. He started to say the dirty sons were after me, but he died before he could finish it. Then everybody jumped at conclusions. They forgot that I've been honest all my life. They forgot that I've fought off stage robbers lots of times to save passengers and money cargoes. They forgot everything except what old Buff's words *sounded* like."

Curt stopped, and the white-faced, hot-eyed kid didn't move.

"Then something else happened," Curt went on desperately. "The bandits caught me at Gail's place. They took me out and tried to make me tell where I'd hid the money. They beat hell out of me. Look at my face! They killed Louie Brettler because they gave Louie one of the gold pieces. They didn't know till I told them, that the gold was a new design and could be traced. They kidnaped Gail, and I have to get her back. I can do it if you hold your horses, Jimmy. If I have a Chinaman's chance I can prove I didn't kill Buff or steal any money. But if I go to jail I can't do anything. I'll hang for something I didn't do, and nobody will find Gail. They'll kill her because she saw who killed Louie Brettler. She knows who they are, kid."

Still the boy said nothing. Intent as the

stare of a snake, his eyes stayed welded to Curt Healey's battered features.

"**A**LL I want is a chance, Jimmy," Curt kept on. "The same kind of a chance you'd want, or old Buff or anybody else. Get me a piece of paper and a pencil and envelope and I'll write something to Luke Storm, the sheriff. Give me a chance to show you what I can do, kid."

The youngster backed away. Carefully watching Curt, he got a paper, pencil and envelope from a drawer. He laid them on the table in front of Curt.

"I ain't sayin' I believe yuh," he said hoarsely. "I ain't promisin' a damn thing! Let's see what yuh write."

Curt wrote on the paper:

Luke Storm, Sheriff:

Meet me at the cleared mesa on top of Sugar Loaf tomorrow. I'll meet the stage robbers there. You hide in the brush and you'll hear them clear me of this charge against me. They have kidnaped Gail Trent. Be there early and don't be seen.

Curt Healey.

Curt addressed the envelope to Luke Short. He shoved the paper across the table to young Jimmy Stevens.

"Read that, kid," he said miserably. "Then if you think I'm worth a gamble, put it in the envelope and take it to Luke Storm tonight. If you don't believe there's a word of truth in me, tie me up and take me in. If I can't get Gail away from those gents I don't give a damn what happens."

Slowly, the kid took up the note and read it. Then he stared at Curt. He opened his mouth once and closed it.

"I hated yuh, Curt," he said finally, his voice husky with emotion. "God, how I hated yuh! I believed yuh killed the old man. I swore I'd never rest till I saw yuh dead. But I'm gonna give yuh a break. I'll take this to Luke Storm. I'll wait till tomorrow night. If by then yuh don't prove yuh didn't do it, Curt, I'll be after

yuh again. And I swear to God I'll get yuh. Even if I have to foller yuh all over the world, I'll do it!"

Curt Healey shook his head. "You won't have to follow me anywhere, Jimmy," he said softly, a touch of bitterness in his voice. "If this don't work, I'll be dead. If I don't die, I'll give myself up to Luke Storm. If I can't do what I said I'd do, I'd rather die than keep on running all the rest of my life. I'd rather be dead than live the life of a hunted coyote."

Young Jimmy Stevens put the letter in the envelope. He sealed it and tucked it in his shirt pocket. With a nervous yet determined gesture he thrust his gun into his holster.

"Maybe I'm crazy," he said, a trace of uncertainty still in his voice, "but I'm gonna do it."

He whirled suddenly, went out the door, his boots clumping on the hard-packed sand of the yard, his spurs jingling in the silence of the night. Then his pony's hoofs thundered in a wild staccato as he raced away. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Path to Boothill

A GREAT relief came to Curt Healey as he listened to the kid ride off. Then a feverish, frenzied impatience came to him. Tomorrow he would have Gail. Tomorrow he could clear his name.

He stepped to the door and looked at the sky. How many hours, how many minutes, how many seconds, till the time would come when he could blot out this thing that had made his words crash down about his ears!

A feverish nervousness in his quick stride, he went to the peg on the wall where a belt and two holstered guns hung; old Buff Stevens' pistols. They were loaded. Curt slapped the belt about him. Outside, he rode southward toward the big, flat-topped mesa that loomed blunt

and black against the gray of the sky. Hiding his horse in the brush, he crept to the edge of the mesa and waited.

Gradually dawn lightened the sky. A rider came through the pale gray light, and the glitter of a badge on his vest front, the blocky set of his broad shoulders, told Curt Healey that it was Sheriff Luke Storm. The stage was being set. His trap for Dirk Zeida was ready to be sprung.

The sun peeped over the hills. The mesa was light. Still as the rocks behind him, Curt waited. Hours passed, and the heat pressed down on him. Impatience tugged at him. The cold finger of fear reached down inside him and touched his vitals as the day dragged and no other riders came into view.

The shadows crept out onto the flat. The darkening fingers of night began to close down on the hills. Over across the mesa, where Curt Healey knew Luke Storm to be hiding, there was no movement, but Curt knew the sheriff was there, waiting, watching. . . .

It was dark. The moon slid up over the peaks, to glisten on the rocks, to sprinkle silver across the hard, shining mesquite leaves. All the things that Curt Healey had counted on came gradually down about his head, a confused jumble of worries, a mixture of doubts and fears. Why didn't Dirk Zeida come? Wasn't he going to keep his end of the bargain about Gail Trent?

Defeat came to rest on Curt's shoulders, heavily, discouragingly. He knew they wouldn't come. For some reason they didn't want to trade. In some way they had tricked him. Parting the brush ahead of him, Curt Healey stepped out into view.

"Luke," he called. "It looks like—"

The glitter of a gun barrel showed over there outside the brush. Curt jumped sideways as an orange spurt of flame leaped out of the shadows. Something hot burned the skin of his side. He fell back into the brush and rolled away from the stream of

Stage Driver Wanted—Dead or Alive

bullets that crashed through the brush. He rose to his feet and ran to his horse.

He thundered away, circling among the hills. Somehow, he couldn't blame Luke Storm for shooting at him. Luke had been tricked, too. But Luke felt that Curt Healey had tricked him. Luke had got the note, had taken Curt at his word. And Curt hadn't delivered. In the eyes of Luke Storm, as in the eyes of everybody, Curt Healey was a dirty thief and a murderer. And now Luke Storm thought him to be a dirty liar, too!

Despondent, baffled, Curt rode slowly toward Pimas City. Why hadn't Dirk Zeida come? If he wanted gold. . . . Then Curt Healey cursed. He put spurs to his horse. He raced swiftly across the hills to the stage road where he had driven the coach with its load of gold. He climbed up into the rocks where he had hidden the boxes, reached down into the gash where he had put them. They were gone!

Curt Healey laughed—a harsh, cold cackle without mirth. No wonder they didn't want to trade! No wonder Dirk Zeida had laughed when he had wagged an agreement out of Curt to swap the girl for the gold! They didn't need to trade. They already had the gold! After capturing Gail Trent they had forced her to tell where it was! For Curt had told her!

FOR a moment Curt stood there, baffled. Then he mounted. A promise he had made to Dirk Zeida came back to him. A promise to kill them all. . . . And now he had to do that. There could be no more tricks, no traps. Just the ugly spectre of death staring Dirk Zeida in the face. Just Dirk Zeida knowing that he would die if he didn't talk. . . .

Slowly, unhurriedly, Curt rode toward town. Then he circled. He stopped at the house where Jesson Eams, the banker lived. He had to be sure. . . .

He tapped on the door, and Eams came

(Continued on page 108)

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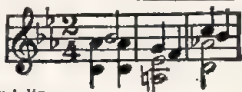
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44 WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 107)

to it. The banker gasped, started to close the door. Curt thrust a booted foot in the crack.

"Did you get the gold shipment?" he asked the banker. "Did anybody give it to you?"

Staring, as though fascinated, Eams shook his head.

"No," he said nervously. "You know I didn't get it."

Curt turned abruptly, mounted and rode to the main street. That's all he wanted to know. No honest man had found the money. The law hadn't found it. Dirk Zeida had taken it.

Curt dismounted down the street from Zeida's saloon. Vaguely, he kept wondering who the fourth bandit was. He knew three; but there had been four.

It was late at night. Only a few lights beside the ones from the saloon filtered their golden rays out into the dark street.

Curt stopped for a second in front of the saloon doors. He took his guns in his hands. He wondered if Zeida or Garr or Ott would talk now, when they knew they'd die if they didn't talk. He pushed the doors open, stepped inside and swung up his guns.

His humid eyes found Zeida standing beside the bar. Garr was not far from Dirk. Charley Ott stood at the end of the room. There were three other men there, punchers from some ranch down south, their faces vaguely familiar to Curt. But he didn't know them. The barkeep, polishing glasses behind the bar, stopped, stared, then set a glass down carefully and didn't pick up another.

"I told you, Dirk," Curt said coldly. "This time there's no bluff! Where's Gail?"

Dirk Zeida looked at the stone-faced man there just inside the door, at his flaming eyes, at the steady guns jutting from his hips. Dirk licked his lips. He shook his head.

"I don't know," he said shakily. "I swear to God I don't know!" His twisted face was the color of ashes.

CURT HEALEY laughed. He swung up his guns. Dirk Zeida screamed and his hand whipped to the gun at his side. But Curt Healey's gun crashed and Dirk Zeida smacked against the bar with terrific force. A pistol from off across the room began to chatter and roar, and a bullet spun Curt sidewise.

All the guns in the world, it seemed, began to clamor at once. A bullet struck an oil lamp on the wall, and the glass shattered. The oil caught fire as it cascaded to the floor. A thick column of smoke climbed up the wall and spread in a big billowing wave across the room. Through the smoke Curt Healey stumbled toward Charley Ott.

"Where's Gail?" he yelled.

But Charley Ott didn't answer him. He shot and the bullet nicked Curt's arm. Through the thickening smoke Ott fired again, but he was choking, coughing. The red flames dancing in the smoke-filled room made vision difficult. He missed again. Curt stumbled toward him. Ott raised his gun. Curt felt a butt buck in his palm. Ott stumbled, fell.

Yells, screams, the pound of boots came from the street. In the smoke-misted red flicker of fire Dutch Garr ran, stumbling, across the room, Healey after him. He heard Dutch coughing, leaped, caught him, bore him to the floor. Dutch strained around and his gun flamed almost in Healey's face. Curt caught Garr's wrist and pressed his arm back.

"Where's Gail?" Curt yelled.

Garr squirmed, turned convulsively under Curt. His gun bellowed again and Dutch Garr relaxed suddenly, lay very still, killed by his own bullet.

Curt Healey rose. Through the thick smoke he staggered out the back door. Deep in him now was a great depression.

They hadn't talked. He'd been forced to kill every man he knew who could tell where Gail was hidden!

The smoke was thick in the alley. Red embers floated down from the sky. Curt Healey reeled along, totally oblivious to the turmoil, the shouts, the entire town turning out to fight the fire. He stumbled up the steps to the back door to the sheriff's office. He shuffled tiredly through the hall, seated himself in a chair at the side of a desk in Luke's office. Dully, he watched the flames die. They'd got the fire under control. The yells stopped. The town quieted. Through the smoke that still hung like a haze in the street, Luke Storm came up toward the office.

Curt Healey laid his guns on the desk, so Luke could see them. He raised his hands shoulder high when Luke stepped in the door. Luke stopped. His gun flipped out, pointed at Curt. He came over to the desk, stood there with his gun not a foot from Curt's face, staring at Curt. His eyes were hard and round and bright.

"I'm giving myself up, Luke," Curt said miserably. "I didn't rob the stage. I didn't kill Buff. But I have to find Gail Trent. You can do that better than I can. I'm sure she's in town. Whoever killed Louie Brettler has her hid here somewhere. Go ahead and lock me up, then take this town apart to find her. Maybe she'll be able to prove I'm not a killer and a thief."

The sound of boots on the steps in front of the office made Luke Storm step back. He turned his head slightly to see Bob Bannion, a puncher from the Box L, come into the office. Bob Bannion stared for a moment at Curt. His face went hard.

"So you got the dirty skunk?" he asked.

"Yeah, I got him," said Luke Storm.

"I'll be on hand when yuh hang him," Bannion said coolly. "That's one thing I won't want to miss."

Curt paid no attention to their talk. Only the thought of his miserable failure

filled his mind. Thought of the stage line he and Gail had planned on. Their home! Gail still a prisoner somewhere! Maybe dead. . . .

"We just brought young Jimmy Stevens into town, Luke," Bannion went on. "He musta fell off his horse and broke his leg. He tried to crawl, but he was unconscious when we found him. He'd been there in the hills for a long time, maybe a day or so. We took him to the doctor, and Doc says he'll be all right."

Bob Bannion tossed an envelope on the desk in front of Luke Storm.

"That was in his pocket," he went on. "It's addressed to you." He turned, said, "I'll be seein' yuh, Luke."

"Sure," said the sheriff.

CURT HEALEY kept staring at the envelope on the table.

Suddenly his brain was on fire, his heart was racing hard. He swept a gun into his hand and crashed it hard across Luke Storm's wrist. Luke's gun clattered to the floor. Healey rose, bent forward across the table, his gun steady on the sheriff. Curt Healey's eyes were not dead now, not dull. They were alight with an unholy fire. His face was the face of a man mad with a deadly purpose.

"So it was you, Luke!" he whispered. "You're the fourth bandit! You stole Gail Trent! You were in with Dirk Zeida and Dutch and Ott!"

Luke Storm's face grew gray. His eyes lost their confidence.

"You're crazy," he said.

Curt Healey grinned, tapped the letter on the desk. "This proves it, Luke," he said. "I gave this letter to Jimmy Stevens last night to give it to you. I saw you come to Sugar Loaf Mesa and thought you had got the letter. Now that I know you didn't get it, I know the only other way you could know to come there was through Dirk Zeida. Dirk Zeida was the

only other person on earth who knew I was going to be there."

The knuckles on Curt's hand grew white as he gripped his gun. "Where's Gail, Luke?" he asked. "Produce her in three seconds or I'll kill you!"

For an instant Luke Storm hesitated. Then he moved slowly around the desk. With the gun in his back he went the length of the hallway, down the steps to the room in the basement of the jail. He unlocked a door. Gail Trent was there in the dim light, tied to a chair, a gag in her mouth, tiny boxes of gold stacked behind where she sat!

"Untie her, Luke," Curt said.

Luke unfastened the knots that bound the girl.

Gail Trent rose, swayed as she tried to stand. Curt shot out an arm to support her. Then Luke Storm moved like a striking snake. His hand shot in under his vest. A gun glittered in the semi-light. It flamed and Curt Healey was knocked back. His own gun roared, and Luke Storm wilted to the floor.

Curt couldn't stand now. His legs were wobbly. His head was spinning. He sank down . . . down. He heard the pound of boots, faintly, dimly. He knew, vaguely, that men were grouped there in the tiny room. He heard Gail Trent's voice, telling them who had killed Louie Brettler, and what she had heard Dirk and Luke and others talk about while they held her captive. As though through a fog, knowledge came to Curt that a doctor was working over him.

"He'll live to drive many a stage," said the doc.

Curt Healey tried to smile. Maybe he did. He didn't know. All he knew was that his dreams were back with him again. A clean name. A stage line that would grow and be big and contribute to the building of the West. A home with Gail. . . .

Western Brain-Twisters

(Answers to questions on page 77)

1. A sky-pilot, or Hell's Fire and Brimstone Artist.
2. His hat.
3. Joaquin Murietta. Known as the Scourge of California, Murietta committed uncounted killings. He was slain, along with others of his band, on July 23, 1853.
4. A ramada is a shelter, constructed of brush and small branches. It is set on poles and used as a shelter from the sun.
5. Only prime stuff brings top prices at roundup. Those refused by buyers are run into "cull" herd. These animals are the runts, cripples, lump-jaws and other riff-raff. They are usually sold for dog food.
6. Spurs bent or wired in such a manner as to prevent the rowels from revolving. They are not permitted in riding competition.
7. The year 1890. It was the Battle of Wounded Knee.
8. The Black Widow.
9. John Wesley Hardin, said to have killed forty men, received the name from Wild Bill Hickok.
10. The barb of a war arrow was similar to a fish-hook—almost impossible to withdraw, once driven into a person's body. Hunting arrows held pear-shaped heads so they could be removed and used again.
11. Often, when grazing is poor, horses will eat branches or twigs from sage brush—seeds included. The seeds make the animal weak, nervous and inclined to be balky. Such horses are "saged" and not worth keeping.
12. Buffalo Curley McCall. He shot Hickok at Deadwood, S. D. McCall was duly hanged at Yankton, S. D.
13. An "arroyo."
14. "Gone to Texas."
15. It is usual to remove the "hooks" in California and Nevada. In most other states, riders keep them on.

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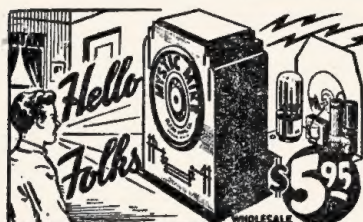
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THE EDITOR

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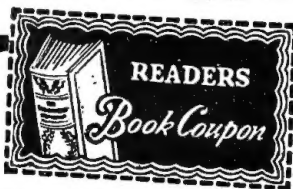
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